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THE  
SPINSTERS OF BLATCHINGTON.

BY  
MAR TRAVERS.

VOL. II.



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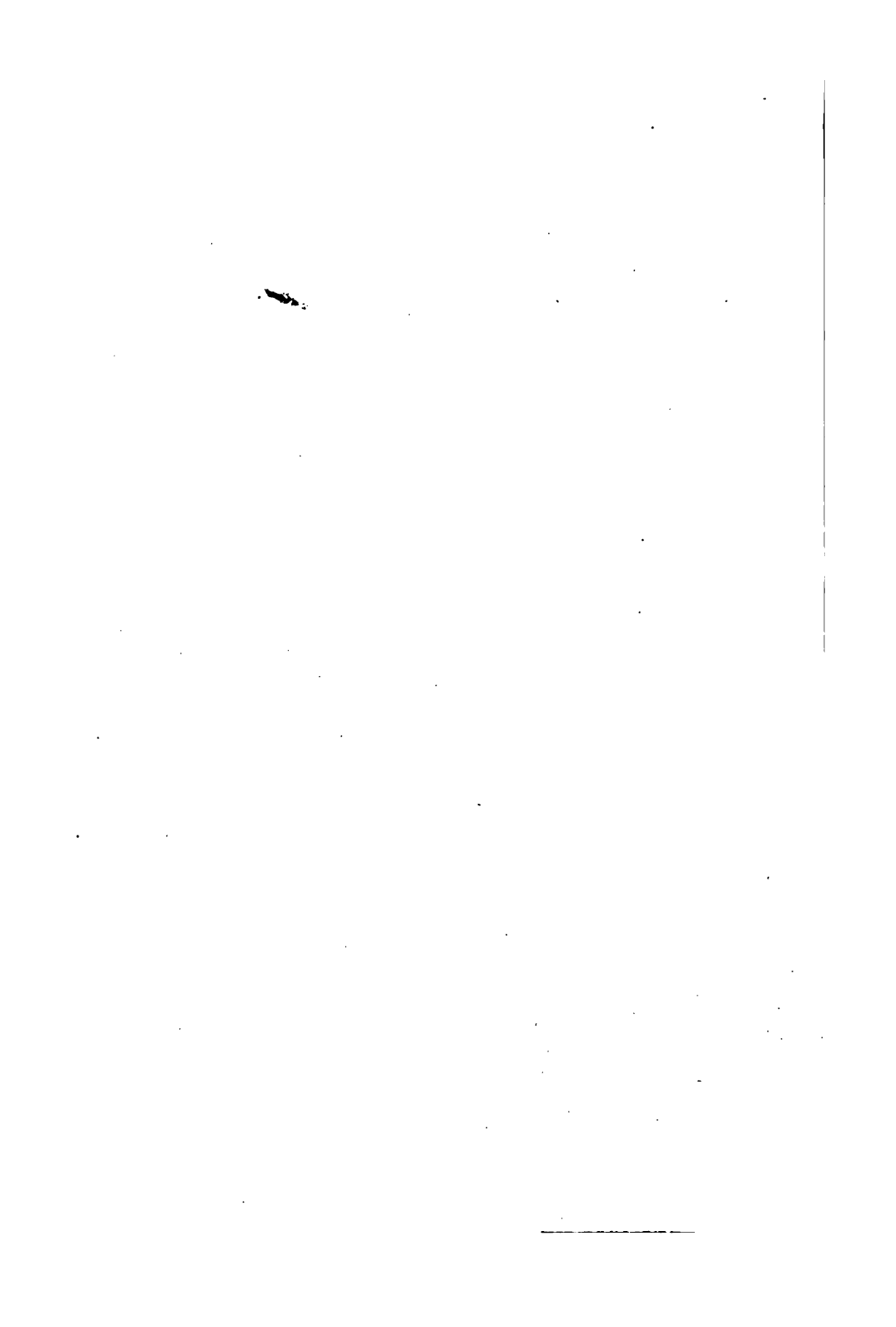
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# THE SPINSTERS OF BLATCHINGTON.

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## CHAPTER I.

### FALLINGS-OUT AND MAKINGS-UP.

A GRAY October morning, mist and rain falling fitfully ; a wild wind, a turbulent sea, a perfect war of the elements. People entering the Lodge breakfast-room by ones and twos ; Miss Thorold dispensing tea and coffee ; her Ladyship pondering over the contents of the postbag ; the General fidgeting with the *Times*, the expression of his face not particularly happy.

“Coffee ready, Selina ?”

The General’s good-humour begins with coffee, a fact understood by the members of his family.

“Not yet, General.”

VOL. II.

A

"Oh, the pot is off the boil, I suppose?"

"I don't think it has yet been on the boil, General," replies Selina, in a brightly aggravating voice.

Sir George was particular; he insisted always on having his coffee ground, mixed, made, before his face; no hands but his were trusted to proportionate chicory and best mocha. He cast his eye around the table.

"No eggs? Ha! I thought as much;" then he glanced at his paper. "Those infernal Alabama claims," he muttered; "at 'em again, are they? They've good eyes for business, though they do talk through their noses."

Steps approaching the doorway, slow and heavy like the tread of Baker, the butler. The General rattles the paper ominously; his ears are keen.

"Confound you, sir," he says, sharply, "what have you done with the eggs?"

He apostrophises the unconscious Mr Denny, who steps into the room gingerly, making a graceful, or would-be graceful bow, directed to the urn or to Miss Selina, who sat behind it.

The General gets up, crustily, to return his guest's good-morrow, and Lady Thorold puts aside her letters.

"Did you sleep pretty well, Mr Denny?" she asks, in an anxious tone.

"Oh yes, pretty well, thank you. I may say very well, on the whole," spoke Mr Denny, insinuating that he was subject to disturbed rest, probably he laboured under the impression that such a supposition would enlist Miss Thorold in his favour.

"Perhaps they put a pea between the mattresses," hinted Godfrey Sterne, turning round from the window. "Well, Selina, did you dream of old maids?"

"Yes,—myself one of them," replied Miss Thorold; a reply that Mr Denny made an ineffectual attempt to remedy, by suggesting that no one who had the pleasure of knowing Miss Thorold could suppose she was born to a spinster state.

"I suppose not," she said, dryly, rising to cut bread whilst awaiting her coffee-pot.

"Allow me!"—Mr Denny made a dash at the knife—"that isn't a lady's work, Miss Thorold." He was proceeding to mutter some

commonplace about delicate fingers, when her bright brusque laugh stopped him.

"I've clearly defined notions about women's work, Mr Denny. There you tread on dangerous ground—there, you and I shall fight, I am sure,—there, unless you are perfectly well up in all the pros and cons, I shall beat you hollow, beat you miserably. You will leave the Lodge-gates raving, vowing mentally, if not in wrathful syllables, never to enter them again."

"You don't mean to say," spoke Mr Denny, with a troubled countenance, "that you are a—a woman's rights—a what d'ye call it——"

"Person," interposed Selina, giving him a quizzical look. "Take Mr Mill's word; it does very well for our class, you know."

"Person, then," said Mr Denny, "that you go in for——"

"Coffee, hot and strong. I shall have pleasure in showing you that I can mix the ingredients correctly, preparatory to giving you my conclusions on the suffrage question. Be seated, please."

They drew up their several chairs; gloom fell from the General's brow as Baker deposited

the steaming beverage by his side. Mr Denny looked as though he feared an after-breakfast argument.

"It is a subject," he said, alternating between corned-beef and cajerie, "that I take little interest in."

"Take a little of what, did you say, Mr Denny?" queried the General, good-naturedly, from his end of the table, applying a knife and fork to the tongue before him, and looking at his clerical visitor with an interrogatory smile.

"Thank you! Ah! if you please," spoke Mr Denny, seizing the golden opportunity, and bowing towards the tongue.

"What will you attack, Sterne?" put the General, who seemed anxious to make up for his previous churlishness.

"The teapot, if Selina doesn't object, thank you, General. I suppose," glancing at the several dishes, "these are so many souvenirs of our last night's party?"

"Yes; be sure of it," went on Sir George. "That's the worst of a party—one does get such wretched fare after it. All the odds and ends must be used up. Aren't we going out

to dinner, Sterne?" he adds, winking mischievously at his wife.

Lady Thorold stirred her tea, crossly.

"You don't abuse my management when the bills have to be paid, my dear."

"Your management, mamma?" spoke Selina, bluntly. "Why, you've nothing to do with it."

"How can you say such a foolish thing, Selina? Who talks to Mrs Martin about it all, if I don't?"

Lady Thorold was very glad that what threatened to become a disputed point was quieted by the entrance of Miss Anstruther. Jane sailed in calmly, making sundry bows.

"I am so sorry I'm late. Is it very late? Dear me!" glancing at the bronze clock on the mantle-shelf and at herself imaged in the glass behind it, "that can't be the time, surely?"

"Quite correct!" sharply, from the General, who prided himself on the accuracy of his timepieces, and was never indulgent to a want of punctuality. "Got it from Benson a month or two ago."

"It doesn't matter, Jane," said Lady Thorold,

in a conciliatory tone. "You look so nice, my dear, we'll quite excuse you for being late. I wish, Selina, you'd get a blue cashmere."

"Do you like it?" queried Miss Anstruther, drawing in her chair and glancing from the folds of her morning-gown to Godfrey's face.

"Yes; it's a pretty colour," he was obliged to reply, seeing it would have been difficult to find fault with it. Miss Anstruther looked pleased.

"I thought," dropping her voice, "you'd be glad to see me in blue. What is this?" She lifts a sprig of red geranium from her plate. "How exquisite and fresh!" She put it to her nose, delicately, then held it out to Godfrey. "I suppose *you* have seen it before?"

"Well, yes; I've been looking at it for the last hour, on your plate," he said.

"I put it there," Miss Thorold admitted, willing to save further mistake. "You said you liked a bit of red, Jane."

"So I do;" Miss Anstruther forgot to thank the donor, seeing it was only a lady; "but I can't wear it with bright blue very well, can I? I wish," to Godfrey, "you'd let me fasten it into your coat?"



"Not now, I thank you." He was always frigidly polite in speaking to Miss Anstruther.

"That is what you always say," she said, in a stage-aside, looking at him reproachfully ; "you never will take anything I offer you," and she laid poor Selina's gift coldly upon the tablecloth, with something of pique and ill-temper in her tone.

Mr Sterne put out his hand suddenly and snatched up the discarded little flower.

"I 'm not much given to floral decoration ;" as he spoke he drew the geranium stalk through a button-hole ; "but I 'll wear it to oblige you."

"I think," spoke her Ladyship, surveying them from the other side of the damask, "that Godfrey has been waiting for his breakfast until you came down, Jane. He has tasted nothing yet."

"Oh, do eat something—do !" lisped the affianced bride, handing her betrothed the toast-rack.

To elude further trouble, he commenced to butter a slice of browned bread, the while he sat speechless, fixing an abstracted eye on Mr Denny's plate, the curate being his *vis-à-vis*,

thereby terminating the poor man's breakfast, who imagined nervously that Mr Sterne, gifted with polite loss of appetite, was taking a mental enumeration of his chicken-bones and egg-shells.

"I don't think the party went off very well ; do you, Selina ?" remarked Miss Anstruther, when the matin meal was drawing to a conclusion. "Those old maids of yours were so hard to talk to, and everybody seemed so dull."

Miss Thorold looked half-irritated half-amused.

"I'm sorry you found it stupid, Jane. I didn't ; and I'm sure Mr Sterne found enough to say to Miss Sally ; he talked to her all the evening."

"Not all the evening exactly," slowly spoke Miss Anstruther, evidently some double *entente* in her speech. "I think there was another Miss in the question."

"Oh ! Miss Maria, too ?" laughed Selina. "Dear, devoted Godfrey ! I was afraid your attentions were a little too marked."

"What was the matter with that funny little girl in blue ?" queried Jane, who was not

likely to suffer jealousy as far as the ladies Perkins were concerned. "When I left the supper-room to see that Mrs Thorne had her wraps, I saw her shivering in a corner of the hall. She looked so wild and white—she really did, Selina."

"I know that; she was not well. To add to her trouble, she had spoilt Miss Sally's dress, poor child! I didn't want to let her go back with them last night, but she would."

Miss Thorold rose and walked to the window as if she would change the subject. "What a wild morning!" she said, watching the yellow leaves that the driving wind swept across the pathway. But Jane was not to be silenced thus; it was her custom to harp on one string till she tired her listeners out.

"But don't you know why she looked ill? and how did she come to spoil Miss Sally's dress, Selina? Dear! what a pity for the poor old thing! I suppose she couldn't afford to buy her another?"

Selina Thorold turned her back upon the questioner, still it was incumbent on her to reply.

"She spilt her wine over it. I'm sure I

don't know whether Miss Sally will expect a new gown or not ; I should imagine decidedly not."

"Well, it's very funny. There she stood, Aunt, her hair all over her face, shivering, and right in the doorway. Mrs Thorne passed and didn't see her."

"Her sister saw her," sharply and shortly affirmed Miss Thorold. "They weren't going back together : naturally, they wished to say good-night to one another."

"I'm sure I hope Molly'll never come again in that antique brocade," sighed Lady Thorold, gathering up her letters. "Mrs Thorne declared she looked like an actress."

"Mrs Thorne paid her a compliment," said Godfrey, in a low voice, the subdued anger of his tones perceptible to no ears but those of his keen cousin ; "she looked as I can picture an ideal Juliet."

"Dear me ! what a pity we didn't have a tableau !" minced Jane, looking at her future husband coolly. "Were you two playing the 'balcony scene' when we so unkindly interrupted you ? Romeo inside instead of out, wasn't it, Selina ?"

She scarcely ever made so clever a hit. He went white, setting his teeth together.

Mr Denny and the General quitted the room to knock about the billiard-balls ; Lady Thorold and Selina passed out, the former saying, "Did I tell you the queer things Mrs Thorne said about Mr Bloomfield, Selina ?" and then Godfrey Sterne faced his affianced wife.

"I am glad they have left us alone," he said, his hand on the back of a chair.

"So am I, dear." Miss Anstruther gave him a loving glance, and settled herself comfortably, according to her after-breakfast custom, upon the sofa. "It's so very rarely I have you all to myself."

"The circumstance may become more rare," he quietly said.

"Are you going away ?" Jane opened wide her eyes, but she looked rather out of the window than at him.

"No ; I have at present no such intentions."

"Then what do you mean, Godfrey ?"

"I mean, you are perfectly free, do you so choose, to take back a gift you promised me a while ago."

"A gift !" Miss Anstruther moved her

eyes languidly from the dribbling rain to the sprig of red geranium. "What gift?"

"The gift of your own person."

She went off into an aggravating giggle.

"Godfrey,"—between the little *roulades*,—"what an odd man you are! You're joking, aren't you?" she adds, for there is a stony whiteness about his face.

"Were you joking just now in your allusions to Shakspeare's *dramatis personæ*?"

"Why, yes, of course."

"Then be pleased to understand," he says, sharply, "that in future such jests on your part will be considered an intimation that you wish for your release."

"Dear me!" she simpers, leaning back against the cushion, "how severe we are! Perhaps," in a somewhat hesitating voice, though she affects indifference, glancing furtively at his face, as the words were drawn slowly through her teeth, "you are trying to make me offer you yours?"

"Take care, Miss Anstruther," he said, in heated tones, his lip quivering, "that you do not give me reason to demand it. Believe me, I should not scruple to do so to-morrow."

"I'm sure I don't know what I've done that

you should create all this fuss," whimpered Jane, raising her handkerchief to her eyes. "I'm very sorry, Godfrey, if I've offended you—I didn't know you'd get angry about such a little thing. You know, don't you," sobbing slightly behind the lace, "that I'd rather vex any one in the world than you; and I'm sure, dear, I've vexed people enough for your sake, and had to suffer for it, and never told you a word about half I've had to bear—and—and——"

And then Baker walked gravely into the room to clear away the breakfast things, stopping the list of grievances in the very nick of time, or who knows how the quarrel might have terminated; and who can say but that the few presents Mr Sterne had lavished on the bride-elect might have found their way back to their primal possessor; and who can say, but for that trivial interruption, how the balance of fate might have turned in Molly Bloomfield's life? Baker's obtuse face showed no signs of comprehension whatever as he stole quietly off with his spoons, leaving Mr Sterne whistling at the window, "Oh dear! what can the matter be?" as unconcernedly as if nothing

had occurred to ruffle the equanimity of his temper. Yet the sagacious butler's tongue was unloosed below stairs, and all the servants knew there had been a scene, that Mr Godfrey had looked in an awful passion, and that the lady had been crying, poor thing. They all pitied her; she'd made a bad bargain, they agreed; and she was a nice lady, she was, and they shouldn't wonder if it never came off;—it being in this sense a relative pronoun, having for antecedent a wedding.

On the appearance of Baker, his presence first notified to her by the rattle of china and silver, and the commencement of a low whistle from Godfrey's lips, Miss Anstruther had bounded from the sofa like a ball, taking a flying leap, disappearing with the flight of a flapping-winged seagull across the passage into the drawing-room, where she surprised Selina Thorold less by her red eyes than her unwonted activity.

“Why! what's in the wind now?” says the kind spinster, a little curiously be it confessed, for she was ever prepared, as were the domestics, to hear that this engagement had all blown over.



"Oh! just Godfrey's ridiculous sensitiveness," replies Miss Anstruther, calmly pocketing her handkerchief and stopping at the pier-glass to smooth her disarranged hair. "I hope, Selina, if ever you are engaged, you will not have a jealous man to deal with."

Selina smiled softly to herself; she was behind the scenes; you know, and understood all the small contrivances not supposed to be visible to the naked eye.

"I hope not. Don't you rather envy me my freedom—my unfettered ease, Jane?"

"Oh, no! by no means. I should be quite ashamed, Selina, to be as old as you are, and neither engaged nor married."

"I'm proud of it!" Miss Thorold's dark eyes flashed as she lifted them momentarily with a touch of scorn to her friend's face. She was standing by the table, her hands immersed in a pile of half-dead flowers, relics of the preceding night, tenderly endeavouring to save bits of falling geranium and doubtful rosebuds. "Do you think, Jane," her voice a little agitated, "that a woman reaches my age without having loved?"

"Well, I don't know," calmly replied Miss

Anstruther, taking up sundry floral odds and ends. "This is a beautiful bud—so is this," raising two small yellow buttons from the heap.

"I didn't say, 'do you know?'" determinately continued Selina; "I said, 'do you think?'—a distinction and a difference, Jane."

"Well, I think most women could not, dear. I'm sure if I was not to marry Godfrey, I should marry somebody else, because, you see, I could not endure a single life. But I can't fancy you in love."

"Nor I,"—the red glowed hot on Selina's cheek, her tone trembled,—"because, Jane, I loved so strongly that I can never love again. I loved with all my passion, all my being; my blood turned to fire; by day, light painted to me only one face; by night, darkness brought it to me on a level with my own. It has stood before me, so that I have stretched my hands out to it, and clasped them shuddering, with blinding storms of tears across my eyes. I have wrestled with my agony on my knees in my nightdress by my bedside. I have gone down in the morning and made coffee for the General with smiling lips. It was death I prayed for, like a fool, like a coward.

I tell you, Jane Anstruther, you do not understand what that word *love* means—you cannot comprehend it. Your love and mine are opposite as the poles—different as our garden cascade is to the thunders of Niagara. You sing your love on the house-tops; I buried mine in the bowels of the earth. You say, if Godfrey cast you off, you would take a substitute—not only would, but could. O Heaven! my lover was as God to me. I was punished! The real God, the jealous God of Israel, He who slumbers not nor sleeps, came between us two, rending us apart. I lost him! The lamp of my life went down to a glimmer—my soul sat in gloom, in the shadow of death; but peace came in due time. Other interests bridged the pain; the strength of endured years is mine now. Jane!”—Miss Thorold, who had been pacing the room in a phrenzy, arrested her feet beside the flower-tray again, and took a withered petunia between her shaking fingers,—“you can understand, I hope, that I glory in my faithful old-maidism—that I am grateful for the vivid memory that gives me neither sadness nor desolation in my lonely life. I simply could not marry.”

Miss Anstruther sat and gaped; she had begun to fear Selina had gone raving mad; she contemplated ringing the bell.

"You, of course realise that I will not have this subject referred to again?" spoke Selina, quietly, and rationally enough even to reassure her startled companion, "neither to myself nor to any other person. What prompted me," she mentally added, "to unlock the door of my heart and bid such a woman look in and see!"

"Oh! dear me, no. I'll forget it, I dare say," consolatively replied Miss Anstruther. "I'm sorry for you, Selina. It is very dreadful. You spoke just like a book—I couldn't make you out."

"No!—I am sealed to you, as 'Sordello' is to me." She fetched herself a chair; the paroxysm had weakened her and left her pale; then she went on steadily with her work.

"It is a sorrowful task propping up dying flowers—reminds me, somehow, of striving to keep old people alive longer than one should. I hope they'll not drive death away when he comes to visit me, in hale old age. I don't want my senses blown out, bladder-like."

"Selina, please don't joke on such serious topics."

"Serious toothpicks," said Selina, quoting her favourite *Happy Thoughts*. "Do you want these two buds? because, if it's of no consequence, to quote Mr Toots, you can give them to me to fill this gap. What has Godfrey been sensitive about, eh?" Yellow roses recalled her cousin to her mind, and likewise conjured up a picture of Molly wearing an old muslin dress, and a *gloire de dijon* in her red-gold curls.

"Oh, he got cross just because I teased him a little, and even that little he couldn't take amiably. I wish he knew all the teasing I have to bear like a Job; for, to tell you the truth, my friends don't at all consider I'm making a brilliant match. But then, of course, they don't know how handsome he is."

"Perhaps they don't know that he's a gentleman," said Selina, bluntly. "Why not tell the cotton lords that he is next door to a baronetcy? Those moneyed people, who sit all day long on bales, always respect rank, even of a most mediocre degree. You know Godfrey

is the next heir, if anything happened to Thorold, don't you?"

"Oh, wouldn't that be nice!" smiled Jane gleefully, referring, let us hope, to the prospective rank of her future husband, and not to the demise of the young captain of the — Battalion of the Rifle Brigade. "I think, Selina, if you don't mind, I'll keep these little buds. They'll just do for Godfrey's coat."

"Keep them, by all means; box them up for the 5th of November, if you like. I know you're fond of making him presents of my flowers," said Selina, slyly. "Here's a red one; the petals look pretty safe. Will you not take this also?"

Miss Anstruther grabbed it, and mixed the flowers together, tying them with a piece of blue ribbon, equally suggestive of lovers' knots and Tory principles. The choice little bouquet she watched throughout the day with a care amounting to anxiety, now putting it in water, now shutting it into some dark place, taking occasional peeps to make sure that the roses still existed as such, and not as mere stalks and pistils. As dinner-time approached, attired in elegant evening costume, she walked

down-stairs, carrying in her right hand the gift which she intended as a peace-offering to her betrothed.

It was a dusky October evening, and Baker had not yet lighted the hall-lamp, so that shadows enveloped the whole staircase. Before her, in the passage, stood a tall form, the white cravat gleaming through the dim obscurity.

Jane Anstruther flourished her flowers in his face. "Something pretty for you!" she cried, thrusting the not very fresh petals beneath his nose; and shrinking back, poor woman, disappointed and ashamed, when Mr Denny's fat voice struck her ear-drum.

"You're too good! I'm exceedingly obliged to you. Allow me!" in the same moment grasping the bouquet, and offering her his arm.

"I didn't mean it for him; only, you know, I couldn't say so, could I, dear?" she said, apologetically, having explained her blunder to Godfrey. "Do you mind? Because if you mind," she added, quite prepared to assault Mr Denny in a winning way, "I'll go and reclaim them for you."

"Oh, no!" spoke Godfrey, politely repudiating the roses and the lover's knot with which they

were bound together; "let the poor fellow keep them, Jane; by no means disturb his pleasant sense of your magnanimity."

The unfortunate receiver of these good things appeared to be suffering from anything but a pleasant sense of Miss Anstruther's gift. He tried first one button-hole, and then the other, and finally felt himself compelled to lead her Ladyship in to dinner wearing a huge clump of flowers in the breast of his coat, like a lady, or a Christy Minstrel, from which dangled a long end of blue ribbon, and about which the General even could not refrain from joking in his clumsy fashion. Miss Thorold, too, astonished, and, to confess the truth, slightly displeased at this transfer of her cherished buds, curled her lips ironically, and superciliously lifted her handsome eyebrows, so that we can scarcely wonder that the curate, blushing and confused, committed himself trivially when called upon suddenly to ask the blessing.

"For what——" began the General, in his sharp tone, accustomed to go through the usual form himself.

"My dear," remonstrated Lady Thorold,



waving her ivory napkin-ring towards the clergyman seated by her side, "you forget—Mr Denny——"

"Oh, ah! yes, be good enough, Mr Denny," said the General; and then, amid the standing group, Mr Denny folded his hands demurely, and bowed his head, so that the parting of his hair was on a level with Selina's eye, and his voice cut the still air in deep tones, thus demanding the benediction—"For what we are going to receive, may the Lord be truly thankful. Amen."

"Amen!" echoed the General, eager to attack the mullagatawny, without noticing the *lapsus linguæ* of which his clerical friend was guilty.

"Amen!" said Mr Sterne, coughing significantly, the while the ladies—always discriminating—laughed and looked at each other.

"Is that a High or a Low Church form?" gravely asked Mr Sterne.

"The usual one, I believe," replied Mr Denny, a crumb of bread that irritated his throat rendering curt replies a matter of necessity.

"Not in this part of the world, I assure you."

"Why, yes, my dear fellow—what d'ye mean?" spoke the General, lapping his soup noisily. "Same grace all the world over. Toast!"

Poor Mr Denny, presently made aware of his blunder, inwardly resolved to redeem his character as a minister of the Established Church on the very first opportunity that offered itself, and continued his dinner in melancholy silence, to which the enormity of his lovers' knot added a romantic charm. Later in the evening, Mr Sterne sealed his fate in life, whether for good or ill remains to be judged by other tests.

"I owe you some apology, I think," he said, leaning against the whatnot, beside which sat Jane Anstruther, looking over her collection of songs. "I was, somehow, cross and unmannerly this morning. Do you pardon?"

"Oh, yes!" she answered, in a matter-of-fact voice. "I've no memory for these things, you know."

"Does your memory carry you back to an evening like this, a year ago very nearly?" he asked, significantly.

"Yes." I believe she blushed a little ; she was looking at the gay picture on the cover of "Il Bacio."

"I asked you to be my wife, didn't I?"

"Godfrey ! what strange questions ! Of course you did."

"I see no 'of course.' I knew you as a little girl. I fancied we might lead a comfortable life together. I never deceived you into believing me a man of great romantic attachment, did I?"

"Never !" laughed Jane, trying to untie the knotted strings of her portfolio.

"Supposing I told you I didn't love you at all?"

"I don't think I should care very much," she said, in a low voice, with tenderness underlying the simple words, "if you still let me love you, Godfrey."

He took the portfolio from her hands, and patiently disengaged the twisted cords ; those tones touched him.

"It was a long while ago, Jane."

"It was !" she sighed.

He reached forth his arm and touched the keys of the piano ; just a bar he played and two lines he hummed—

"Then name the day, the happy day,  
And I will buy the ring."

Miss Anstruther looked at him with glad eyes.

"O Godfrey! am I to fix it really?"

"If you please, Jane."

"Are you going to sing, dear?" called Lady Thorold from her sofa. "We're all so sleepy to-night; we will have prayers early, if you don't mind. But we'll be very glad to hear your song, my dear, all the same."

Thus hurried, Miss Anstruther named her wedding-day—the second of November; no romance in her courtship, no romance in the prospect even of the honeymoon, shrouded as it stood in fog and drizzling rain, in misty cold, in absence of glad sunlight, amid dying leaves and naked boughs. Yet to her it was a moment of intense relief and satisfaction; she had advanced as nearly as she conveniently could the date which would bind her life with that of Godfrey Sterne's for ever; no release to her or him, saving only the divorce court and the grave.

Very quietly the evening closed. Mr Denny's extempore prayer was of itself sufficiently

lengthy to serve the purpose of a soporific—an appeal addressed chiefly to “our dear friends in the flesh.” Poor Mr Denny had nothing about him that the French world gracefully term *si spirituel*.

“Well,” said the General, as he and Godfrey stood together on the low step of the door, puffing their cheroots, “I do hope that man doesn’t intend paying us a protracted visit. Good fellow enough, no doubt; but I declare, Sterne, I never was so long on my knees in my life!”

## CHAPTER II.

### MOLLY IN TROUBLE.

"Who'd have thought Molly would have been so careless!" sighed Miss Sally, shaking her head sorrowfully over a saucer in which she was preparing some salts of lemon. "I'm doubtful in my mind whether ammonia wouldn't be better, sister, after all. Dear, dear! what a sad thing to be sure! What do you think could have upset Molly?"

"I suppose you mean what could have made Molly upset her wine over you, to speak plain," rejoined Maria, poring over a cookery-book in which she hoped to find a receipt of a last-night's sweet concoction. "I don't know; I suppose she ate something that disagreed with her. Here it is!" in a tone of exultation as deep as that experienced, possibly, by Columbus when he first touched the shore of a new world. "Lor! what extravagance!"

Miss Sally elevated her eyebrows meekly.

"Why, you said 'Lor,' sister," insinuating that it was cruel she should be reprimanded for a vulgarity of which her sister was culpable co-equal with herself.

"I caught it from you, then, Sally, if I did," spoke Miss Perkins, putting her thumb upon the receipt, and looking up from the pages of Soyer. "Here's five eggs, and no one knows what else. I think I shall halve 'em all."

"Then it will be only half as good, won't it?" hinted the junior, nervously commencing to apply the salts to the stain marring the beauty of the new silk.

"No, no, you silly child! Why, 'twill be half the quantity—that's what I mean, not half the goodness. That was a right down foolish speech, Sally; though, to be sure, how should you know better when you've never tried your hand on such things?"

"Hush! don't speak now, for goodness' sake," implored Sally, tears filling her eyes.

Miss Maria gazed sorrowfully at the plum-coloured breadth being doctored by her sister's trembling fingers, and glided off presently to give her small domestic orders concerning the eggs and cream requisite to the making of the

delicate dish. In the course of time she reappeared, bonneted.

"Well, my dear," for something pathetic in Sally's face, claimed her rarely expressed sympathy, "how've you got on?"

"It's quite spoilt," replied the gentle spinster, wiping her eyes in the methodically mathematical way peculiar to many elderly ladies, using just the four corners of her handkerchief; "it's gone as white as the door-step."

There was no consolation to be offered. Maria, standing bolt upright, her head cased in straw of a brownish hue, wearing a shawl with a point, looked compassionately at her sister's downcast face, in which the mouth worked grievously. Both knew it would be years and years before another silk-gown could be purchased out of the scant savings of their joint-purses.

"Well, I thought of walking up the hill to see Mr Bloomfield; and I've a mind to speak plainly to Miss Molly," wrathfully spoke Maria, after the first spasm of disappointment and pity and anger had passed. "She never so much as apologised, and that would have been ladylike, to say the very least of it. If she



don't know manners, it's time she was taught."

She was preparing to make her exit, but Sally rose from her chair, and stopped her.

"Don't, sister, there's a dear!"

"Don't what, Sally?"

"Please not to mention it to Molly. I think the child might take on about it, and as it's only me who suffers, I think, if I'm willing to hush it up, we all should be. Perhaps I can put trimming up the sides," she added, cheerfully, a dawn of hope rising starlike in her despondency. "So mind you're silent, there's a dear! the poor child might lay it heavily to heart, and I couldn't abear that!"

Gentle, generous Miss Sally. Here was one of those trivial instances that herald nobility of nature—one of those little unnoticed, unrecorded bits of heroism that mark upon the life-post the true road to heaven. The sorrow and disappointment she had suffered, owing to the carelessness, she supposed, of a giddy young friend, had not been of a very moderate description, yet she would not have it breathed; the injury she sustained was not trivial in her eyes, yet she would not blame.

"Well, let go my skirts, then, Sally. For my own part, I consider a word or two would do good, spoken in a proper spirit, and at a right time. Of course, I shouldn't nag at the child for an hour."

"You promise?" queried Sally, still retaining hold of her sister's gown.

"Why, to be sure, seeing it's your affair, not mine. Good-bye! You look a bit shaken, sister. Go and take a sip of cider, and put the dress away. We'll have a talk about that by and by."

Miss Maria slowly mounted the corn-field, and wended her way to the Bloomfields'. The professor sat by the dining-room window, in his dressing-gown and morning slippers, reading his paper. He looked happy to see her—his eyes beamed. The old man's face, in spite of his gay nature, wore, nevertheless, a somewhat anxious expression.

"Be seated, Miss Perkins. I'm so glad to see you. Somehow, I haven't been able to persuade my feet to carry me so far as Broad Street, but I hope the girls have thanked you for all your good things. It was very kind of you. I confess, now my teeth are particular,

that your tit-bits have given me appetite when nature seemed altogether averse to eatables. My appetite's a mere make-believe of one at present, Miss Perkins. The last month or two, it has failed me quite. I don't know but that my little girl's absence has had something to do with it."

Miss Perkins sat opposite, subjecting him to a closer scrutiny than he imagined. A troubled expression shone in her eyes.

"I think," she sniffed, significantly looking from his round cheery face, its drawn lines showing to an unusual degree, its colour abated perceptibly, to the unremoved breakfast-tray, and the dust upon the mantel-shelf, "that Nanny ought to come home."

"Oh, no! I didn't hint that I wished it, did I?" put in Mr Bloomfield, hurriedly. "I've special reasons, between ourselves, Miss Perkins, for hoping to interest Mrs Thorne in my girls. I wouldn't for the world cut short my poor child's happiness—dear little woman—dear little woman!"

Mr Bloomfield drew forth his red silk pocket-handkerchief and rubbed his nose hard.

"You see my poor Lucy knew Mrs Thorne

very well; and at one time, when we were in very reduced circumstances indeed, she induced me—but why,” suddenly checking himself, his eyes dim, “should I distress myself and you by raking out these old buried reminiscences?”

“It’s often better to rake them up ourselves, Mr Bloomfield, if there’s a reason for it, than to let others do so for us,” oracularly spoke Miss Perkins, recalling the vague disagreeable innuendoes thrown out by Mrs Thorne on the preceding evening within her immediate hearing. In her honest, blunt fashion, she was pretty nearly disclosing there and then all she knew, in the hope he would clear himself from even this breath of suspicion that was blowing dust upon his name in a poisonous zephyr amongst his girls’ best friends. Probably, too, she might have been guilty of some womanly curiosity to discover the skeleton that Mr Bloomfield had so cautiously and successfully kept locked out of sight all these years. But a suspicion of something too sad to entertain or speak of had crossed the thoughtful spinster’s brain, and had set her kind heart throbbing since she had entered the simple room, in which the old man sat alone this morning;

and she drove the train of his thoughts and hers into another groove, with an adroitness that did honour to her keen observance.

"You've got only one cup on the tray," she remarked, glancing at the plain white coffee-cup, and the solitary knife and plate beside it; "and it don't look as if you'd had bacon or any relish at all."

"Well, no, not this morning," smiled the master. "You're shocked, very likely, to see the breakfast things left till now; but Betty has a good deal to do and think about when Nanny's away, and my other wee woman's upset a little this morning, owing to her party, I suppose, and the excitement and the late drive."

"Fiddlestick! Has the rising generation brittle bones, that a young girl gets laid up where two old women don't? Where is Molly? If she's in bed, I'll go and see what's the matter. Maybe she wants a Gregory powder or a little cooling draught of some kind. Thank you! don't you stir. I know her room as well as I know my own."

Miss Perkins climbed the steep stair leading to the girls' bed-chamber, and unceremoniously

walked in. Betty, having heard the familiar tread of her boot coming into contact with the thinly-carpeted wood-work, had followed her, and her square angular figure filled up the narrow doorway.

"Why, my child," said Maria, gently enough for her, "what's all this about?"

On a low seat in the window-corner sat little Moll, so denominated by those amongst whom, like a sapling in the forest, she had sprung to her full height; her head just on a level with the sill of the window, wide opened, and in her hands her handkerchief, rolled tight into a hard ball. She had flung aside the blue brocade dress, the satin showing discoloured and worn in the garish daylight, and had donned a thin old dressing-cape, that revealed, by reason of its scantiness, her muslin petticoat and her white satin slippers, not yet removed. As she had worn her hair the night before, coroneting her brows with glossy golden braids, from which escaped one of two tiny refractory curls, so she wore it yet, and the white small bed remained as when, full of hope and buoyancy and tremulous excitement, she had arrayed her lithe and rounded limbs in

the antique gown, running down-stairs humming gaily the pretty Shakspearian song—

“Hark ! hark the lark at heaven’s gate sings,”

to kiss her Daddy’s cheek and wish him glad good-bye. Alas ! for the dream of youth when the awakening is so startling and so strange. The poor child had crept up the dark still stairs on her return, shutting out the curious Betty with the plea of fatigue ; had mechanically, as it were, stripped herself of her unwonted finery, and then had sunk down into this window-nook gasping for air, for relief in tears from her great misery, and with red-rimmed eyes had watched the morning dawn, till the splinters of sunlight heated the cold air blowing on her bared breast, and the “ pipe and trill of half-awakened birds ” stirred the oppressive stillness into life. Life ! never again life as life to her, she thought, in her grief ; for what is life without love and with a broken heart ? Desolate as a thistle stump from which the wind has shorn the fairy down. “ Oh, my love ! Oh, my dear love ! Oh, my lost love ! ” sobbed the little girl, conscious that the breaking day was breaking for her as none had done

before—conscious that though the sun would shine, and the birds sing, and the lambs bleat on the cliff-side, and the ducks dive under water in the pond without the garden, and the immutable sea roll up its salt waves to the rocks, the glow of a day gone by would never be hers again. So, quieted slightly through sheer weariness, she still sat, poor child! striving as nobly as she could to bear the shock with a fortitude worthy, she said, of a woman, when Maria Perkins and old Betty startled her by their uninvited presence. The former drew a chair close to her young friend, and raised one of the hot hands, as she said, in blank consternation, her keen eye taking in at a glance the smooth counterpane and the undisturbed coiffure, and the sheen of soiled satin-shoe—

“Why, my child, what is all this about?”

“Nothing,” replied Molly, struggling to be calm. “I wasn’t sleepy, and—and I don’t feel very well, thank you!”

“And this is your way of getting better? Come, come! I shouldn’t like to be your patient my dear, if I was taken ill, or was in anywise poorly. Fie! not even undressed—not even



the hair-pins taken out! You went to sleep as you are, I daresay, right under the window; and this October too!" shuddered the spinster. "Betty, didn't you bring the child any breakfast?"

"Yes, indeed, mum," wrathfully spoke Betty, indignant that she should be thus distrustfully interrogated. "I fetched her up' steaming coffee, and water fit to set her feet on the bile, and a egg on some toast, poached beautiful, 'twould set your mouth a-wat'ring; but she'd not so much as look at it, not she," snorted the vexed old woman, in her just anger.

"Enough," reiterated Miss Maria, cross through her very anxiety, "to give you your death, Molly. All night in the cold, half-naked too. Nanny'd no business to go away and leave the whole household like this, knowing what a set of babies you all are! She ought to come back."

"Oh, no!" cried Molly, snatching her hand away, and sobbing as though her heart were bursting quite. "I don't want Nanny; I only want mamma. O mamma, darling! why did God take you from me? why did He leave your little daughter alone—all, all alone? Oh,

if I could put my arms round your neck, my sweet, sweet mother, my dear, dear mother, my own angel mother, and tell you all my trouble, and kiss your dear mouth! I'm so unhappy, so very, very unhappy!"

Betty wiped her eyes; the outbreak was inexpressibly touching. Miss Maria sat still, wondering; she, too, was moved by profoundest pity.

"My poor child! you are very ill, I fear," she said, gently, her voice husky. "What shall we do, Betty? Ought we to call her father?"

She spoke in the quietest aside, but Molly overheard. The young thing drew herself erect on the low seat, and passed her linen-ball nervously from hand to hand, the while a storm of tears drifted hurricane-like down her colourless cheeks.

"Oh! please not, dear Miss Perkins! I will try and be good—I shall be quite well presently. You mustn't call papa. Nanny's not here to comfort him, and it would make him sad to see me cry. I'll do anything you like, if you'll only let my Daddy not know. I can't help it, I can't stop it."

Lower and lower drooped the pretty head, faster fell the blinding rain, pitiful sobs choked the utterance of words. She put forth her arms helplessly. Miss Perkins clasped her in a tight embrace; never before had she held any one so close, so lovingly. Her own blue eyes swam in a mist of tears, but she controlled her voice.

"There, there!" in the tone wherewith mothers soothe their children. "Hush! hush! my dear. All will be well by and by. Old Maria's going to play nurse again, and take care of you, as she did a long, long time ago. She'll sit by you, and she'll take care of Dadd's and you and every one till wise little Nan comes home. Only, you know, Molly must try and get strong for Dadd's and Nanny's sake, or it will be too much for one little head to bear, and we shall have our little Sis looking well-nigh as old as Sally, and all from worry, my dear."

This homely reference to Anne, together with the promise that her father's wants should be ministered to, soothed the young girl somewhat. She allowed them to help her to undress, every now and then the red sorrowful eyes refilling,

the while her lips quivered with a half-sad smile, as if to say, "Oh, yes! trust me, I'll be good, indeed I will!" Every now and then, too, she bent her hot, aching head gratefully to kiss the fingers so adroitly and quietly disrobing her; and when the kind old spinster lady stooped her stiff back, going down upon her knees, to remove the tiny satin-shoes, hard with sea-water, and ruined by it, Molly returned her reproving glance and ominous shake of the head by saying, in her natural way, her voice a little weak and tremulous perhaps, "Don't scold! That's the first pair I ever had in my life. It will be ages before I want any more finery."

Then Miss Maria took her up in her arms like a baby, for all she was so tall, and laid her in the white-covered bed; and Molly turned her face to the pillow, closing her eyes, yet conscious, all the same, that they were standing by, and looking down upon her tenderly, and vaguely hearing the murmur of their voices.

"She's a bit better, ain't she?" says old Betty, even her high treble beautifully subdued.

"I hope so," replies Miss Maria, drawing the coverlid nearer Molly's chin. "We'll leave her a while, Betty; she'll get some sleep perhaps. By and by, she must have something—beef-tea, or tea and a snap of dried toast by itself, I'm of opinion, would be best for to-day. There's a kind of low fever hanging over her. Foolish child! I believe she ran further than just out into the garden last night. Did you notice her slippers, Betty? They've stood inches deep in water, though, to be sure, 'twas salt. Yet the wind was fit to lift your roof, 'twas indeed. Dear, dear! the world's a weary place. I've got my notions about it all, but I'll keep 'em to myself till a proper season. There, there! she seems dozing. We'll go, Betty. You haven't cleared your breakfast-tray yet, do you remember?"

She kissed Molly's forehead, lightly. "It's very hot," she said to herself, following Betty out of the room, the old woman jealously striving to have the last look as the door was closed.

Then the poor child opened her shut lids, and turned herself round towards the window, and fixed her big eyes on the flapping sails of the mill showing in the distance. At first,

naturally the great trouble, so fresh and unexpected, occupied the whole brain, driving other thoughts before it with its miserable whip of recollection. She did not blame Godfrey Sterne, who, to all appearance, had been playing with her throughout. Oh, no ! he was her idol yet, and love is as blind in this century as when he first touched common earth with his rosy feet. Whatever else changes and grows old in the round revolving world, Cupid can still do without spectacles.

“So sad, so strange—the days that are no more !”

Molly would rise from that little bed soon, and enter on the familiar life again ? What was it ?—A sock to be darned, a pudding to be made, a story to be read, a piece to be practised ;—old gowns to mend, old Dadds to sing to in the darkening evenings ;—Nanny to chat to as of yore of present incidents—oh, never of these buried in her heart for ever and for ever !—the few friends to meet unchangeable from spring dawn to winter night—just this, no more. No more now. There was a glory that lightened everything, but it had passed ; there was a dream, the inheritance of nearly every

life, but it had faded into ghostly nothingness, and this awakening was sad and strange to her. She lay still, fever throbbing in her pulses, fever throbbing too in heart and brain. Her father came slipshod into the room once or twice, and sat down on the edge of the bed, and took her little hot brown hand in his.

“How is my little girl? Is my pretty Molly better? I can’t have either of my little women knocked up—not as long as I live.”

He did not mean it, but he worried her, this old fond father, who moved about her room—his slipper down at heel, the very sound of its “flap-flap” on the thinly-carpeted floor irritating her excited nerves—pulling at the curtains, tapping her pillow, and so forth, in the fussy mood evinced by those who are but slightly acquainted with sick-rooms. And then Maria Perkins marched in and took him off, scolding him for invading quarters in which he’d no business to show his face. “What did men know about nursing? Let the child alone, leave her to them; they’d pretty soon set her up again!” So Mr Bloomfield trotted down once more to his *Standard* and his solitary parlour; and his young daughter looked at the

mill's sails until her eyes ached and her head grew dizzy from watching the four great arms as they whirled round in the wind ; and by and by the simple diversion dulled the force of her trouble, and she began wondering at the rapidity with which the sails revolved, half-longing they would turn and twirl the reverse way, half-willing them to do it ; and at length her lids drooped—poor burning swollen lids—over the dimmed grey eyes, and Molly Bloomfield's sharp-pointed pain became mercifully “rounded with a sleep.”



## CHAPTER III.

### FATHER AND DAUGHTER.

MISS MARIA said she knew how to master fever, and, true to her word, she mastered it ; as, the probabilities are, she would master anything to which she lent the forcible energy of her character, and the downrightness of her tongue. Fate assuredly never intended that this outspoken, matter-of-fact, determined woman should be married. Spinsterhood came naturally to her, as the wish to be a wife is natural to other women of a less severe cast ; and the chances are, had she joined her lot in life to that of the gentleman who repudiated her affections, on the ground of religious differences between them, she would so have mastered him that he would have rued the day when he led this angular middle-aged woman to the altar. Molly got over her illness after a week's fight with it, and was dressed up in a shawl, and allowed

to take her tea down-stairs in company with her father and Miss Perkins ; they had lighted a scrap of fire in the grate to prevent a chill, and she sat between the glow of heated embers and the last rays of the early-setting sun, nursing her tabby cat, affectionately stroking his soft fur, and delighted to hear his noisy purr.

"Nice old fellow ! good old fellow !" whispers Miss Molly, nestling her cheek against pussy's head. "Who came to keep my feet warm when missis was ill, eh ? and sang such a pretty low song, making such ado about nothing ? Wasn't it my own old Tom—my faithful old Tom, eh ?"

"You're just a pretty old maid, Moll," says Mr Bloomfield, polishing his spectacles, and regarding her with a beaming countenance.

Poor Molly ! Her white cheeks crimsoned, and her eyes filled.

"So I am, am I not, old fellow ?" she replies, glad that her face is buried in Tom's furry coat, and that the room is shadow-wrapped. "Hear how loudly and how joyfully he says Yes, Dadds !"

"Fiddlestick ! odds, lobbs, and buttercups !"

cries Miss Perkins, rattling the china on the tray, and raising the lid of the teapot with a sharp click. "We've old maids enough in Seaford without a rival stock of you up here on Blatchington Hill. Your daughter's a spinster, not an old maid, Mr Bloomfield; there's a difference, I'm thinking. Hand me the kettle, please. They'll be calling you in church some day, Molly. So-and-so, bachelor, to Mary Bloomfield, spinster, of this parish—mark my words."

She shrewdly marked Molly's face.

"You've got it all by heart, Miss Maria," jokes Mr Bloomfield. "You've read the marriage-service a score of times, I'll be bound."

"I have been guilty of that impropriety, Mr Bloomfield," replies the elderly maiden, settling her cap-strings, and proud, in a slight degree, to have the opportunity afforded her of letting him know that even she could have been married; "but we won't refer to that, if you please. It's a thing of the past." Mr Bloomfield, though occasionally prone to obtuseness, possibly was aware of that fact before she mentioned it. "It's never spoken

of by Sally and me, and we're very contented with that station in life to the which it hath pleased God to call us," she wound up, giving him her reminiscences of the catechism. "And I can't say that we ever wish to change it."

"No indeed, madam," thought the ex-master, "not at your time, I should hope!"

The allusion to her possible marriage set Molly in a tremble again, unstringing her nerves. She took her cup of tea from Miss Perkins with shaking fingers, and but for that timely draught, might have frightened them with a fresh hysterical outbreak.

"Well, well!" spoke Miss Perkins, determinately, as she kissed her in bed, in the evening, "'twill be well for you now, child, to stir about a bit; there's nothing for depression of spirits to be compared to work."

"You're not going away!" said Molly, sitting bolt upright, looking so fair and sweet and flower-like in her snow-white robe.

"Why, yes, to be sure. Do you think Sally and me's parted company for good? I'm going back, if all's well, my dear, to-morrow. I expect she's got into a fine muddle this

week, and there 'll have to be a grand turn-out. She'd never think of seeing that our dolt of a girl cleaned out the pots and pans after they'd been used. And I daresay you'll have Nanny home shortly. So, my dear, come the morning, I'll go."

Molly laid herself down with a sigh, her fair hair floating over the counterpane, pushing both her hands between the pillow and her pale cheek, to the which the beautiful bloom of a short time since seemed loth to return. To-morrow! what would to-morrow bring? The poor child, like other suffering children, built visionary hopes upon the fatal will-o'-the-wisp of chance that might bring happiness with the new day. Anyhow, no one, she resolved, should ever guess or know what it was that killed her rest and drove the colour from her face; she would bear it silently. There was a proud safety in this unrevealed sorrow; there would be shame—oh! how insufferable!—were it to be dragged out naked into the light to be pointed at by the village crowd! Molly knew the pitying looks, worse than downright blows, that would be levelled at her, should her secret walk abroad,—the

"Well-I-nevers," and the "Did-you-evers," uttered compassionately or sneeringly at her expense over Blatchington tea-cups or in Seaford visiting rounds; and the little girl calmly determined to be outwardly, if possible, the same, to give no rise to the gossip attendant on a visible "disappointment." Ah! you see, she even allowed to herself in this possible heroism an "if;" and it was assuredly not even outwardly the same Molly as of old who, that next morning, stepped into the breakfast-parlour at the early breakfast time, but a Molly in a tumbled faded wrapper, belted loosely into the slender waist, with faded cheeks and eyes red-rimmed, owing to a Henry-the-Fifth kind of soliloquy through the night-hours, and beautiful curls bunched up carelessly—anyhow, as girls say—on the top of her head. She was picturesque, for by a certain constitutional grace Molly's presence in any guise conveyed a sense of art to the eye, that even loose wrapper and ill-dressed hair failed signally to destroy. A woman must be in a very dreamy, or a very sad mood, when she neglects her mirror, and Mistress Bloomfield had not dedicated so much

as a passing glance that morning to the square of glass upon her toilet-table.

"What! up, Molly!" ejaculated the master; "is this wise, my darling?"

"Why not, Dadds? I'm much stronger than you are," she said, putting her hands on his shoulder and looking into his watery blue eyes—she was tall as he—with a depth of affection shining in her own.

"There you've hit the right nail on the head," responded Miss Maria, "worrying," as Betty declared she did, at the breakfast things for the last time. "Your father wants Anne back, to speak plain, I'm thinking."

"Why Anne, when I'm at home?" says Molly, with a tender little smile, half gay, half sad. "Isn't one daughter enough for any man?"

"No, my dear; there's daughters and daughters, if you know what I mean. Excuse my outspokenness, Molly; 'tis well meant, child. For my part, I'm not averse to Nan's long stay at the Poplars; 'twill lift a few years from her shoulders, I shouldn't wonder; for all Seaford knows that Miss Bloomfield's an old maid before ever she was a young one."

Molly looked hurt, but said nothing. Truth appeals to the conscience as truth at all times, though it was a puzzle to Plato and Pilate.

"Well, I wonder very much what it is that keeps Nanny at the Poplars so long?" mused the master. "She's such a home-bird that it's curious."

"Not at all curious, Mr Bloomfield, begging your pardon. What was it kept Molly there so long at the Lodge? Why, change, to be sure, and something else too, I'll be bound. D'ye think a man of your age is the only man two giddy-headed things are pleased to look at. Molly!" — the young girl addressed turned her scarlet face with a questioning, half-frightened glance—"there's the postman."

As usual, Molly took the letters in at the window—one for her father from Nanny, one to herself in Miss Thorold's handwriting. Her heart leaped up to her mouth, her eyes filled with glad tears. Miss Perkins, watching her over the three coffee-cups, observed how the fingers holding the note trembled, and how the colour ebbed and flowed in the transparent face.

Miss Thorold wrote facts bluntly. She was



never given to a powder-and-jam fashion of proclaiming disagreeable news.

"You've been ill," she said. "I know it from your doctor, dear Molly. Foolish child! how could it be otherwise? He tells me you are white; your strength is going down to a minimum; you want change, and plenty of wine. I must have you here to scold you. I'm very angry with you, but Nature put me at the head of her born nurses. Godfrey is to be married on the 2nd. We all go to London shortly. I intend to chaperone a little friend this winter in a quiet way. With or without your clothes, I fetch you myself on Thursday."

The kind resolute friend! the clear-sighted strong woman, that would make her face her danger bravely, if not nobly! Molly, dizzy with surprise, sat herself down by the window, and folded the dear missive. Was it possible? Could she meet him again?—this man she loved, foolishly perhaps, but, at present, the more from the very fact that they were parted? Could she touch his hand with mere formal courtesy, and speak and move in the old way in this different present? It must be so some time; but, she thought, it would assuredly be easier

when the sacred marriage-ring divided them, more safely than a waste of waters or a ridge of mountains. Yet so Miss Thorold ordered it, commanded it, and her will was strong, Molly knew, and her judgment sure. Weak and ill as she felt, she would go amongst them yet again, and take her old place, sing the old songs, maybe make friends with the wife-elect, that fashionable woman in the rustling silk, whosunned her wealth with appalling gorgeousness in these quiet sorrowful eyes. And with the curious coincidence that sometimes seems to link, as if by fate, the chain of human events, her father read aloud Nanny's brief letter, fixing her return for the evening of the same Thursday—a few short lines, breathing a faint longing for home—a longing that Molly heard so thoughtfully expressed, so sweetly written, with a burning consciousness of the utter uncombated selfishness that was driving her beyond the circumference of the narrow home circle, and of her own unworthiness, compared with the higher nature of her sister.

“Dear Nanny!” she sighed, bending her head over the little note; “if I were more like you!”

Mr Bloomfield overheard the exclamation, and he trotted across the room to her side.

"Look up, my pretty one. D'ye think I'd like to have my little Molly any one but Molly? D'ye think, child, I really am feeling and thinking myself badly off as long as I've one dear girl, no matter which of 'em, at home? D'ye think it refreshes my old eyes—and, bother them, they've troubled me a bit of late—to look at one girl 'more than at the other?"

"O papa! my dear old Dadds!" burst out poor weakened Molly, clasping her arms tight around his neck, and smothering her tears in that close embrace. "I'm sure you love me very dearly, much more—oh! much more than I deserve."

"More than you deserve, sweetheart!" spoke her father, somewhat huskily, patting her on the back as she lay in his arms, her pretty tear-stained face hidden on his shoulder, just in the way we soothe passionate children; "nay, indeed Molly. Maybe," his lips close to her ear, "you'll feel ashamed of your Dadds some day, and call him by hard names, my precious child!"

"Never, dear!"—it sounded curious the tender almost old-fashioned tone she gave the homely adjective ;—" why should I?"

Why should she? We cannot tell whether Mr Bloomfield would have made further revelations to the pink-lined orifice below the loosened curl-knot, for there was an agitation and an earnestness written in his round face foreign to its normal calmness ; but the voice of Miss Perkins, cruelly left out in this whispered conference, cut the probable confession short, and the moment of resolve, it may have been, was lost.

"Breakfast's ready," shortly announced Miss Perkins, who despised, as a rule, family demonstrations of affection, unless it happened that she was the prominent actor in the scene, and who now half angrily rattled her spoon in her cup, a sure sign the tomfoolery was to end. Father and daughter kissed and parted then, dissolving the embrace, and took their respective seats at the table, from the head of which Miss Maria cast a severe reprimanding glance at Molly's disarranged hair—a protracted stare, pregnant with displeasure, by reason of which, happily, the smile curved

Molly's Austrian lip and sparkled in her eyes, so that the great dimples showed again in cheek and chin.

"Well, I'm glad to see you laugh, even if you're laughing at me," said Miss Maria, with the characteristic injustice of narrow-minded women.

"You looked so shocked, I couldn't help it," apologised Molly. "You've cause, I'm sure, Miss Perkins; for who could appear more disreputable than Dadds and I?"

"Dadds and I!" sniffed Miss Perkins, not having yet recovered from her jealousy; "is that your Lodge grammar? It used to be 'Dadds and me,' when I was young."

"I think I'm right," said Molly, diffidently, whilst the ex-schoolmaster spluttered merrily as he buttered his toast, to hear the trivial altercation.

"Oh, indeed!" Miss Maria sipped her coffee and smacked her lips. "I suppose you've got more fashionable books now-a-days than we had in our schooling. Lindley Murray was considered quite good enough then."

"But you wouldn't say, 'Dadds and me's going out for a walk,' would you?" asked

Molly, ransacking her brain for a familiar illustration, which, when found, was unfortunately the very thing Miss Perkins would say.

"Sally and me,"—Miss Perkins strongly emphasised the *me*,—"are accustomed to old fashions, my dear. I don't presume to say that your not right, according to your new books, which turn everything topsy-turvy. I dare-say if I got a new cookery-book, they'd tell me how to put the apples into the turn-over after it was closed up."

Mr Bloomfield fairly exploded.

"Yes ; and maybe," wrathfully added the spinster, determined to revenge herself by "giving him a slap," as she expressed it, "tell us, Molly, my dear, how to find out all the secrets that we hide from the world's eye, and that get talked about amongst our friends when we think they know nothing, whereas, of course, they're sure to find out a little too much."

So the Bloomfields parted from their old friend not on the very best of terms, she having sustained a grammatical defeat, and, moreover, having to sit still and be laughed at, she told

Sally, until she felt "as red as a turkey-cock in the sight of a scarlet handker."

When the kindly maiden lady—for at heart she was kind indisputably—had clapped on her enormous bonnet, in which she was, as she boasted, decidedly old-fashioned, and strained across her shoulders the shawl with a point, pinning it with a great brooch upon her spare chest—we will not shock her sense of propriety by saying poetically "her bosom"—had kissed Molly, shaken hands, somewhat stiffly, with the master, and taken her departure from the cottage, Mary Bloomfield placed Miss Thorold's decisive little letter in her father's hand.

"It seems you two sisters are never to be together any more," he said, ruthfully; "for you'll be sure to go in the morning or afternoon early, since the days are short and cold, and Nan's not coming till the evening, she says. There was a matter I wished to speak to you about, but I suppose 'twill wait till you return. I mustn't worry her," he said to himself, as, with brighter mien and gayer step, she floated through the doorway, to confide the news to Betty. "No, no!

she's not quite strong yet; 'twill wait, 'twill wait!"

This was his habit, the poor old man's dreadful improvident habit, the woful procrastination of duties to be done, that, according to the true bit of copy-book morality, thieves gigantic opportunities for good from lives subservient to its tyranny. Whatever it was that Mr Bloomfield wished to talk to his daughters about, that tiny trivial matter which was weighing on his sluggish conscience, it yet was something that one day, he felt, they would probably know, and that as he had touchingly hinted, they might blame him for, to the using even of hard names.



## CHAPTER IV.

### DISCORD IN THE POPLARS.

It was true Nanny had been away a long time. She thought so herself one evening, as she stood beneath the apple-tree on the lawn, behind her the drawing-room windows, tightly shut, for Mrs Thorne was not partial to air, the lights within revealing the furniture and the two occupants plainly ; and before her the road to Blatchington, crossed by that leading to Eastbourne, and distant downs lying on the dark landscape unrelieved, great masses of heavy shadow. The wind stirred the half-bare boughs above her unbonneted head, with a whistle or a shriek indicative of storm, and there was a glimmer of moon, which the threatening clouds snuffed out maliciously every now and then. There was a kinship with elfhood in Nanny's nature ; in this fierce, warring atmosphere she exulted, she breathed, she was excited. Now, standing so, alone, in semi-darkness, her eyes wandering alternately to ghostly road and low-

ering sky, she was happy in a peculiar wild phase of mixed happiness and awe.

"How like a giant it looks!" she said softly to herself, glancing up at a great mass of rolling vapour to be seen frowning down upon her through the crevices in the apple-boughs. "See, how he sweeps his black mantle round him! I discern the shape of his head and of his form, dimly perceptible by the folds of his awful mantle. He seems to scowl upon me. Were I superstitious I should tremble, I should take it as a sign of the ire of that dreadful God whose voice thunders in the chaunt of Isaiah, as the forecast of deserved calamity. What have I done to be so threatened?" She repeated the question once or twice, as though the realism of the giant had begun to oppress her; then suddenly woke up from a dream, vivified by intense and passionate imagination, and smiled, amused at her own fancies.

"Let me tell myself why I in verity deserve my giant's speechless warning," she soliloquises, stooping to pick up an apple that the pitiless wind, with a howl, had torn from the parent bough and flung to earth. "I have forgotten duty, affection, old ties. I

am guilty of the lowest selfishness. I stand arraigned, convicted, before the tribunal of my conscience. Why have I cared to remain here so long. Do I care for Mrs Thorne above my father? Is it easier to read aloud by the hour, than to mend the old man's socks—to listen to dissertations on politics and authors, than to the simple burring small-talk of the dear old voice?"

Anne Bloomfield asked herself one question here, that, despite her fearless courage, she dared not answer even to herself: "Why have I cared to remain here so long?" The reason lay at the very bottom of her deep heart, and there was only one in the world who might fish it up to the surface, only one whose eyes might peer into the well and catch the gleam of that lying hidden therein—hidden for ever, a secret that proud women proudly hide, that the coarsest-natured of Eve's daughters are tender of.

"I will go home on Thursday," Anne determined, turning her steps towards the hall-door; "that leaves an intervening day in which I can pack up, say good-bye, and let them know at Blatchington."

To reach the door, she went round by the

window, and, staying her steps a moment, looked in upon the room, dark, heavily draped, sombre with oil-paintings browned by the march of years. Opposite the portrait of one of her ancestors—a man with a cruel face, thin lips, a conical forehead, a hard, rigorous unflinching Puritan of Cromwell's time—beside the log-wood fire, sat Mrs Thorne, a flush upon her cheek and brow, lent, Anne supposed, by the glow sent up from the blocks crackling in the grate, her hands folded in her lap upon her stiff brocade, severe in its rich plainness as the puritanical garment of her progenitor. She showed thus, to the little observer without, as a handsome picture of a hard woman with a flashing eye and a decisive mouth, who could be cruel or kind according to circumstance or force of will. Do you think Anne, watching quietly, gazed at her only? No; she looked for another face, but could not see it, for his back was turned. Percy Thorne stood dangerously near the window, talking earnestly. She could not overhear their words, nor must it be supposed that she tried. The pathetic passage in "Enoch Arden," when the husband looks in upon his wife—his only, alas! no more—came into her head that moment,

and she felt how vividly she could realise the pain of a love lost for ever,—a light put out, not to be rekindled as long as these two lived. Why did her own heart burn and her pulses beat the quicker as she reviewed this home scene in which she held no part, shut out in the cold ? Why too—she was in a Tennysonian mood, you will think—should the despairing cry—

“Ye cannot enter in,”

sing through her brain then of all moments ? “They seem so happy; they do not want me. But I shiver ; I must go in now, welcome or not.”

As she turned, Mrs Thorne held up her finger the further to emphasise her speech, and shook it in her son's face, Percy having crossed the room, and standing by her. Had Anne been able to observe his countenance previous to her entry, she, it is most probable, would have stolen to her bed-chamber with noiseless feet, conscious that a storm was brewing equally within as without. Not having had the chance afforded her, and being, moreover, far more resolute and brave than one beholding her for the first time would have supposed, she entered,

holding still her apple in her hand, a pretty pink colour in her grave, pale face, left there as a wind-kiss in a Minnehaha's cheek. She was quite determined to adhere to her resolve of quitting the Poplars the coming Thursday. Conviction, not impulse, so dictated ; it was her duty. Nay, she was beginning to feel very strongly that it was more than her duty ; it was her safeguard, her defence, against herself. Sound common sense, exquisite perception, that stands some women in lieu of worldly experience, bade her begone. The society of this place was dangerous to her peace, to her very strength, morally and physically. She must take the struggle in time, or it would master her completely, leaving an eternal sting and a lasting sensitive shame for her own weakness. Sitting down on the edge of a sofa that might have served in good stead a family of patriarchs, Nanny said, quietly, not without faltering slightly, beating her apple against the palm of the right hand—

“Mrs Thorne, I hope you won't think me ungrateful when I tell you I should like to go home on Thursday.”

The affirmation was received in absolute silence ; the mother and son exchanged a tele-

graphic glance. Percy Thorne, hobbling with the uneven, painful step of a lame man, twice the length of the room, stopped suddenly; wheeling round, he addressed himself to Anne—

“Your reason, Miss Bloomfield, for this abrupt departure?”

His voice rang metallically. Anne coloured.

“They must want me at home, I am sure,” she said, meeting his eyes—in hers, calm truth; in his, a frenzy of passion.

“When did this idea enter your head?” he asked, shortly.

“Just now,” replied Anne, nervously toying with her apple, “when I was enjoying the wind in the garden, Mr Thorne.”

He almost rudely took the apple from her.

“You were on the lawn by the apple-tree; you gathered this a few moments ago?”

“Yes!”

Anne regarded him with a startled look of surprise.

“My son,” spoke Mrs Thorne, as if by effort, “you annoy Miss Bloomfield; she appears utterly unable to comprehend you.”

Percy, by an impatient gesture of the hand,

commanded her to be silent ; she obeyed, and her lips were drawn into one hard line.

"The apple-tree is close to these windows," he resumed, fixing Anne with an eye glittering as the Ancient Mariner's ; "you could see us, could you not ?"

"Oh, yes ! quite plainly. Why ?"

Mrs Thorne attempted to speak ; again her haughty son subdued her into silence.

"No !" Then to Anne, "Never mind yet why. Tell me, you heard our conversation ?"

Anne sat speechless ; the blood mounted to her very temples, her proud indignant eyes lightened with just anger.

"And you will leave in consequence ?"

"I wish to go home next Thursday."

Anne, hurt, offended, could trust herself to but few words.

"You hear her, mother !" He faced Mrs Thorne now. "She cannot lie ; she will not prevaricate. Her conscience is white as an unwritten page ; her pride is Lucifer's. You have done it, hard, cold woman, unworthy of your woman and your motherhood ; you have insulted a daughter-through her keenest sym-



pathies—her father. I blush for you! I am ashamed!”

“Percy, I cannot bear this—I will not!” Mrs Thorne rose to her feet, passion-white. How like they were in mouth and voice that moment! “Have I not silently laid it aside these many years, because I cared for Mr Bloomfield’s wife? And now, because, perchance, in a moment of irritation and suffering, you drag it from my lips once more—you taunt me thus! My son! my son!”

Anne, quivering in every limb, stood up then. “What is it?” she said, her firm musical tones dropping like the cadence of a purling brook upon these fierce voices. “Tell me, for I do not understand. What has my father done?”

Mother and son looked at her, amazed; next into each other’s eyes. Intense relief seemed to soften Percy’s bitter tongue.

“If only, Miss Bloomfield, you had been kind enough to answer me just now, you would have saved me this undutiful outbreak,” he said.

“You see,” spoke Mrs Thorne in an aside, half-triumphant in her intonation,—“you see,

my son, I could have prevented this also,—even I ; but you peremptorily forbade me to speak. She has not heard, I knew that ; she does not understand. Let it pass.”

But to let it pass, whatever it might be, was not so easy. Very grave, but very resolute, Anne stood erect, her deep, calm eyes, like lamps long disused, lighted with a brilliancy rare to them.

“Pardon me!”—she steadied her voice, the exquisitely modulated tones clear as bells in frosty air,—“I must beg you tell me the truth, Mrs Thorne.”

“The matter rests between myself and my son.”

“Not wholly,” spoke out Anne. “My father’s name is implicated. Is it not so?”

“You have no right to deceive her, mother.” Percy was hobbling up and down the room. “Miss Bloomfield speaks the truth ; her father was implicated in our paltry wrangle of a moment back. You are bound to explain, or this trifle, which is an ant-heap in reality, will exist vaguely in her mind as huge as Dwalagiri.”

“Must I initiate Mr Bloomfield’s daughter

into his affairs?" icily replied his mother. "Surely it is more natural, since it appears she is quite unacquainted with his business, she should seek information from head-quarters."

"But," pleaded Anne, "you blame my father, Mrs Thorne, I know not why; and not knowing, it will be so much the harder for me to speak of it. I shall not guess what I am touching upon. I may do it so clumsily, so unkindly; and had I some foreknowledge, I should be gentler."

"Forgive me!" Mrs Thorne folded her hands, and looked into the fire, away from that earnest interrogatory little face. "You place me in too awkward a position. I cannot speak against my guest's father in my guest's presence."

"Against him!" echoed Anne. Her eyelids fell a moment, when uplifted, no tears showed beneath, neither was there anger in the quiet voice, for Percy watched her closely, and intuitively she was aware he did. "No, Mrs Thorne; I believe that no one in the whole world can do that; but it is hard to hear you insinuate that it is possible. You leave me in miserable ignorance; you have no pity for me, nor for what you cause me to suffer."

"Miss Bloomfield!" The cold ejaculation recalled Anne to herself.

"I beg your pardon, but you can make allowances for my rudeness, Mrs Thorne."

"Scarcely!" There was not an accent of compassion in the hostess's voice. "I have not deserved your reproaches. Because I choose to prevent suffering, you tell me I cause it. The world is ungrateful, Miss Bloomfield."

"For myself," Anne cried, stung bitterly, yet guarding still her wonderful self-possession, "I could bear anything, believe me. It is the reference to my father that destroys my control."

"We are not equally saintlike, then, I perceive. I confess to some personal self-regard. For your father—pardon me, you make me say it—I do not desire his name mentioned again. It is not particularly pleasant to me."

In her anger she went further than she had intended. Anne Bloomfield grew white to her lips, and silently withdrew. Percy waited till the door had fairly closed upon the little figure in its simple dress, and walking to the other side of the fireplace, faced his mother.

"Mother!"

"My son?"

"You remember our pleasant chat of half-an-hour since?"

"I do."

"Leaving Mr Bloomfield, his improvidence, his forgetfulness—nay, if you like harsh terms, his dishonesty, out of the question, you can recall possibly your varied reference to his daughter?"

Mrs Thorne bowed, then she said coldly—

"You are not yourself to-night, Percy; you are excited, you have no command of speech; you will say by and by words you may regret having used to me hereafter."

"I have but little to say to-night; that little will possibly be enough for you, mother. Did you not, a while ago, hint that Miss Bloomfield's conduct towards me had changed?"

"Why rake up what is past, my son? I have noticed it days. It was my duty to warn you, to point out to you snares you would never suspect."

"You are right. I could neither suspect, nor do I yet dare to credit the truth of your assertions."

"Dare!" repeated Mrs Thorne.

"So! Did you not hint—I repeat your words, against the grain though it be,"—he might have said against his finer sense, such littleness being contrary to his subtler nature,—  
"that by the use of many little womanly contrivances, she lent herself to what among London *intriguantes* is simply the art of love-making—that her manner altered, her voice became mellowed, her actions affected, if perchance in any talk you two were holding together, I unexpectedly intruded my person?"

"Am I to go over the thing again?" spoke Mrs Thorne, impatiently. "I tell you, both those girls are actresses. Of course they have been taught by their father that any chance to redeem their broken fortunes lies in the matrimonial market. Lady Thorold hinted to me that Mary Bloomfield would in all likelihood be her niece one day. Next to that step, of course, we all know well, my dear son, there is no equal match in the neighbourhood for Anne but yourself. If you don't see it, you are blind, that is all I can say. What! not see shifting colour and carefully-made toilet! Does the girl loosen her wealth of hair—I confess it is beautiful—for me? Does she sing 'Waft

her, angels,' because I like it, and play in the dark of an evening to enchant me, when I am driven to seek peace and light in my own apartment? Tush! you men are fools all—equally fooled all by a pretty woman's attentions. It is I who was a mole not to have seen it from the first. But I misunderstood her—misunderstood you; allowed her more simplicity, as I allowed you greater strength."

He heard her out quietly, but his hands were knotted, agitation shook his high, clear voice.

"Have you done, mother? because when you have exhausted your vituperation of the Bloomfields, I have something to say."

"Say it then, Percy. Your eyes glare, they half frighten me. The hand points to nine. We have prayers shortly."

Domestic worry here was subservient to régime.

"Mother, look at me! Feast your eyes upon your son—your son, whose deformity separates him from other men by reason of the rancorous bitterness it entails. Is this what women, ordinary women love? is this what talented women of the world angle for?

If across my lonely path falls the good light of a pure woman's favouring affection, you should be grateful to that woman. I repeat it—grateful;—you who, despite your arrogance, your insolent pride, could bring nothing better into the world than deformity.”

“Percy!”

The anguish of the tone in which his name was uttered calmed his heated tongue. He moved a little nearer—touched her forehead with his lips.

“Peace! But, my mother, to-night I must speak according to the spirit's dictates; forget it hereafter if you will. I know that what I am about to declare will stir you, will profoundly startle you. The milk of human kindness I have never drawn from your breast; I was nourished upon the very quintessence of selfishness;—a nature determined as your own, passionate as my father's. Hear me! it is you yourself who give me hope. I have not dared to think of, to contemplate the bare possibility of winning any woman's love” — (Mrs Thorne stood up, her face working) “until now! To me, as to other men, the indulgence of mere sensuous passion has been



possible. The weakness that came within the comprehension of the powerful intellect of St Paul can be gratified by any man—by all. You start, you shudder. You need not. Blush for your poor fallen sisters if you will ; for your son, not yet. He will have nothing but love ; and chastity of life and soul is the tent, the only one in which love, as love—the pure idealism of the spiritual essence of God among us—can exist.”

Then the little gilt clock on the mantelshelf with nine silver strokes rang out the hour.

Mrs Thorne laid her hand on the bell-rope, and upon hers Percy placed his. It trembled.

“A moment, mother. To be brief, to be plain. If Anne Bloomfield, as you lead me, through your misty innuendoes—which, like all such sayings, must be read the reverse way—to hope, to believe, cares for me, loves me, I request you to be kind to her as to a daughter.”

“My God !” spoke Mrs Thorne, in low tones of horror ; “you do not mean, Percy, that you expect me to regard her, to receive her as your wife ?”

“Even so.” His lips smiled proudly ; into

his eyes came a glow she had never read therein before. "Even so. My wife!"

"You will recover from this madness in the morning."

"Yes; I shall wake calmer in the morning."

"It is folly; it is extreme absurdity. I thought you would never marry."

"Nor shall I, if Anne refuse me."

"A schoolmaster's daughter! an old man plunged in debt and difficulty! We should have to satisfy his creditors for our own honour's sake. As it is, those promissory notes are mere bits of waste paper."

"They can be converted into spills, the jar is void of such household necessities."

"You can jest! You are cruel—you are selfish—you are ungrateful! For me, my heart is sore to breaking. I cannot live without my son!"

"You need not try."

"How? You alter your hard resolve?—you will remain mine?—you will not leave me?"

"Never, mother, if you desire not."

"My own son! my dear boy! my life, my sunshine! how could you so mislead me? It was a cruel jest."

"I am not prone to jesting. I have never voluntarily misled you in my life. I am quite serious."

"But you will not leave me desolate? You will not forsake me for a thoughtless child of a wife?"

"No; I will not forsake you. I but give you a new tie to existence—a daughter."

Mrs Thorne, comprehending then, stood erect; her eye flashed, she set her teeth together.

"Percy, I should hate her!"

"Why?"

"Why! For stealing into this house like a thief in the night to rob me of my dearest treasure. Do you think I do not know what it will be? Am I such a fool as not to understand the mean, miserable insignificance into which all my devotion and tenderness and forbearance will shrink pitiaibly? Can I not foresee the shrivelled, dried up, commonplace attention you will allot your mother when you bring your white-faced doll within the doors of the Poplars, supplanting me, and telling her, 'See, I make you mistress here, for all that I have is thine.'"

"Your imagination is looking ahead be-

times, mother. Such a scene as you describe could never be. Anne would not sanction it ; besides, I do not count the Poplars mine to give. We should live here, surely, by your suffrance?"

Mrs Thorne caught eagerly at the straw of opposition thus vouchsafed her.

"True ; by my suffrance alone, Percy ; you speak the truth. Could you afford the luxury of a wife ?"

He understood the allusion. They were very equally matched, these two.

"I go to town by the early train to-morrow. There are matters I wish to talk over with my solicitor."

There came then into Mrs Thorne's mind a gleam of hope. Clever, shrewd, she was keen enough to hide the pleasure that announcement caused her. From the tragic to the homely she turned instantly. "By the early train ? Then I must order breakfast for you. The carriage must be here ; you must tell Johnson at what time."

"I will do so. I am going out for a turn or two on the road. You can have prayers without me to-night, I trust. You need not wait my return. Good night ! Good-bye !"

He extended his hand ; for the first time she evinced a little emotion.

“ We have never so parted before, Percy.”

“ No, dear mother.” Pausing a moment, he lifted his eyes from the crackling log-fire to her face. “ You will be kind to Anne. You will meet her cordially to-morrow. You owe her an apology.”

“ I will make it.”

Mrs Thorne passed his questions by, but he appeared satisfied.

“ Thank you ! that is well.”

## CHAPTER V.

### WOMAN VERSUS WOMAN.

HER son, if refused by Anne Bloomfield, would never marry. Mrs Thorne reiterated that thought a dozen times in the course of performing her early toilet. It was a very early toilet this morning in question, for she had risen with the crow of chanticleer. The wind was high, the nimbus-cloud blackened the sky, threatening a torrent of rain. A whole long day alone with Anne! it seemed as if the opportunity were a providential act; for weak women, superstitious women, attribute all the fortunate coincidences of life to a beneficent providence that narrows itself to their particular personal desires: the accident that shuts others without the pale of providential goodness, is simply ill-luck, to the which probably these others were born, or which they merit through their sins. Mrs Thorne was not exactly superstitious, neither could she be termed weak, in the ordi-

nary acceptation of the word ; but she had a profound belief in her own salvation, and a magnificent sense of having lived an upright life.

“ I know very well,” she would say oftentimes solemnly to the abigail whose duty it was to disrobe her lady and hear the last oracular syllables that fell from her lips,—“ I know very well, Jane, how I stand towards man. I’m all right with man ; but how is it in regard to my Maker ? ”

Jane sighed and shook her head doubtfully. “ That is a question no human being can answer ”—(Jane felt thankful she had never attempted reply, though to be sure she looked upon it as a kind of conundrum that she could not see by reason of her stupidity)—“ but it is a question, all the same, Jane, that you should make it a point of duty to ask yourself every night before you get into your bed.”

“ Yes, ’um.”

The futility of repeating a problem day after day, to the which, seemingly, no solution was to be got even by people who were clever and rich, possibly glimmered feebly in Jane’s mind, for certain it is that she only worried herself with regard to man—man being a concrete thing

to her understanding, embodied in the flesh, and clothed in the livery of Hopkins, the footman.

Now, this morning, Mrs Thorne rose from her sleepless couch, with the uncomfortable consciousness that she stood far from right with man ; she would probably seek it in the evening, further than ever from the sense of upright dealing. There is no limit to which a jealous angry woman will not go to gain her object. It was Mrs Thorne's object to defeat her son in his love-making. She crimsoned to her temples, recalling all her anxiety to educate, to elevate, to develop that fastidious nature with its terrible sensitiveness, its nervous perception of the faintest breath of vulgarity, its exquisite sensibility to external influences. Was it for this that she had spoiled, pandered, petted him ? for this that, despite his painful, palpable lameness, which he felt with such keen bitterness, she had been proud to say, " My son ? "

Once or twice abroad she had feared, when he had been very much struck by certain brilliant women, elegant and rich, whom they had met in society at Florence and Dresden. But he had always recovered from his dream, to her inexpressible joy ; a tone, an



ungraceful act, an unwomanly look of itself sufficient to dispel his illusion, and release him from the thrall of fascination. Now, what had stepped in between her and her boy? Any one she could patronise and show off? Not so; patronage was impossible with the calm self-asserting dignity of little Anne Bloomfield, and it were easier to clip an angel's wings than to parade her quiet loveliness. Any one who would do credit to her as her son's wife? No; Mr Bloomfield was a schoolmaster. Mrs Thorne could not have descended to what in her eyes would have been a falsehood, and have raised his rank to a professorship, and as such, his daughters had no position whatever, leaving their poverty out of the question. To such a marriage as this, she, the last of a line of handsome women—for such the wives of the house of Thorne had been accounted from generation to generation—could never sanction, and this it was her bounden duty to make Anne see as clearly as herself. Robing herself in her dressing-gown, she went down to the dining-room prepared to await her son; he had preceded her, and came to meet her, putting a late rosebud in her hands. The comic and the

grave are meshed very closely in this shifting life of ours. She noticed sharply, as she accepted the flower, that he held a prettier in his hand ; and he, that her toilet was unusually at fault.

"Do you intend to wear that reflex of your face ?" she said, smiling a little, clasping her *bouton* with her brooch-pin ; and he contemporaneously with her speech—

"Did you intend to come down without your cap, mother ?"

Mrs Thorne coloured, and ashamed as a girl of her negligence, she turned to fetch it. On descending, she and Anne met in the doorway.

"Good morning !" each said, somewhat constrainedly, and Mrs Thorne added—

"You are early. I'm afraid the noise of the early-risers has disturbed you ?"

"Not at all, thank you. I have been dressed this hour, fully."

Percy heard the voice ; he advanced, offering his white, fresh-gathered rose.

"Sweets to the sweet, Miss Bloomfield, to quote the Queen of Denmark."

"For me ? Thanks !" She too coloured

taking it, a warm glow reddening her marble face. Putting up her hands she fixed it loosely in her glossy hair, braided close to the prettily-set head, and he stood near watching her.

"You should have been christened Ophelia," he said then, in a low voice, "and I would have played a different Hamlet, trust me!"

"I am not pretty enough for an Ophelia," she returned, quite coolly, though she blushed; "besides, I have no wish, Mr Thorne, to drown myself in a pond."

"No; I should be sorry to see you with duck-weed in your mouth, to imagine you had closed your eyes under the suffering imaged in Clarence's dream. Ugh! I could not bear it, Miss Bloomfield. Death is death, always repulsive, horrible, unnatural, even under the most heroic aspects."

"Don't, my son," ejaculated Mrs Thorne, who, in spite of her apparent pre-occupation, listened and heard. "If you go on in that strain, I shall be nervously imagining a railway accident."

"And mope all day? Nay, you must more fitly entertain Miss Bloomfield on her last morning."

"Not quite my last," said Anne, anxious to show she patiently ignored the proceedings of last night. "You forget, I go to-morrow."

Mrs Thorne quitted them a while to prepare a case of sandwiches, then Percy held out his hand to Anne.

"You were insulted, frightened; can you pardon?"

"I feel neither insulted nor frightened, sir. I am simply anxious—I am sorry."

"Why did you refuse to answer me when I asked if you had overheard? It might have spared you much."

"I could not."

"You are too proud."

"You were unjust. Do you allow to women no honesty? I am not so low that I can put my ear to a closed door."

Some one listening without started then, and went her way.

"Do you know what is the symbol of discord in the world?"

Nanny smiled a "No."

"An apple! You came into the room last evening, looking like a tinted bit of sculpture, carrying discord with your presence."

"O Percy!—Mr Percy," sighed Anne, correcting her involuntary omission.

"But you left it in other hands before, like a haughty princess, you deserted us."

"Not left it—you took it."

"And I may keep it?"

Anne laughed. There is character in laughter. Molly's rang like sweet bells hung in air, a light, soprano tinkle, tone melting into tone, bright as a marriage-peal; but Nanny laughed seldom, and her laugh was faint and low.

"I do not give such presents. Is it not yours? Wasn't it shaken from the boughs of your pet old apple-tree? Perhaps, some day, you will give it to me fairly for my own. I stole it."

Their glances met.

"Be it so. I hold it as a loan, then. On my return, Miss Bloomfield, I shall restore it to you, claiming something nobler for myself. I shall ask you for a gift that is yours alone to give."

And then, as if in the nick of time, Mrs Thorne came in, breaking the sweet colloquy that had stained Anne's face with crimson, looking hard and gaunt and defiant, rolled as she

was in the severe close folds of her chocolate-coloured wrapper.

“ You ordered the carriage, Percy ? ”

“ No, mother.”

She muttered to herself, throwing the sandwich-case on the table, and extending her hand for the bell-rope. “ Men in love are more helpless than a babe new-born. I see it ! ”

His hand, as on the previous night, was laid on hers.

“ Gently ! I ride to the station. The horses will be here presently.”

“ I have put you brandy in a flask.”

“ Thank you, you are always thoughtful. I shall scarcely need it, however.”

“ No ; you have no longer need of your mother ! ”

“ My mother can never be replaced,” he spoke, moved.

“ True, when I am dead and gone ”—tears in her eyes—“ you may say that with less hypocrisy than now.”

Anne unfastened the hasp of the long French window ; it was the easiest, most natural way of attempting to effect her departure ; she could run out to the gate and back—they would pro-

bably conclude she had gone to await the expected horses.

"You need not leave, Miss Bloomfield," said Percy quietly; "there is nothing between my mother and myself in which our guest need feel her absence is wished or necessary."

Anne sat down, busying herself over yesterday's *Times*, and he turned to Mrs Thorne.

"You made me a promise on separating last evening. I need not remind you of it. You, of course, will keep it."

He spoke authoritatively, in a quiet repressed way. These two were warring, one against the other. His voice was haughty, yet he had perfect self-mastery. She trembled from head to foot; the bows on her cap seemed nodding with her jealous indignation.

"I remember it. I gave you my word," she replied. "My word," proudly, "I never break."

Then they all sat down to a meal, silent, dull—a meal only in the form of it, for food was scarcely tasted; yet Anne noticed how careful he was in his attentions to them both, more especially to his mother, and wondered at the

hush prevailing, and at the strange mixture of sorrow and happiness in his expressive face. Good feeling, good taste, the virtue or quality that is innate, never to be taught or purchased, kept Anne within doors when these two, mother and son, walked together to the garden-gate. She followed them with her eyes. Her own share in the parting was the ordinary shake of the hand, nothing more. The hint he had let fall, that from her he was, on return, going to ask something she alone had it in her power to bestow, was neither by look or word or touch repeated. Before he mounted, Mrs Thorne placed her two hands on his shoulders, kissing him between the eyes, once only.

"I have no right to look," said Anne, and she walked straight into the long, dismally-draped drawing-room, from which every ray of sunshine seemed carefully excluded, and took up a book. Uninvited, here she never presumed to raise the cover of the piano. The book she held was Carlyle's "Frederick," which she had been reading, day by day, aloud to Mrs Thorne. She did not read it now ; she sat in that low seat, away from light and air,



the volume on her knees, not turning a page of it. It acted as a pretence, one of the few feminine pretences to which Anne Bloomfield deigned to lend herself; it was a shelter behind which she could hold converse with her memory, repeating the sentence that sent the swift blood in blushes to her cheeks, till they were rosy. "I shall ask you for a gift that is yours alone to give." Knowing as she did that such a phrase could have but one interpretation, she reviewed her probable happiness in a glowing light, that made the future stand out as one brilliant phantasmagoria. Wonderful is the spirit of dreams, that can so uplift us from the common darkness!

Mrs Thorne looked in, her figure standing in the doorway accorded with the sombre stateliness of the room. "I am going up to dress," she said. "Shall I find you here when I come down?"

"I don't know." Anne's reverie interrupted, she felt little inclined for the imprisonment of these heavy walls, from which, contrary to modern laws, frowned the Thornes of old, their faces, now rotting under earth, here permanent in oils.

"But, child, where then may I look for you? I should like to talk to you a little. It is not a pleasant day; if you go out you will assuredly be caught in the rain. Here are agreeable books—here is a piano if you choose to touch it—here are photographs if you like them. We are proud of the collection; we gathered them abroad." Mrs Thorne's tone said emphatically, "What can a little country girl desire more?"

"I will stay here if you wish it," Anne said, divining her host's unspoken desire, at the same time resuming the low chair from which she had risen.

"Do as you please," in a tone of relief. "I shall try and not leave you alone for long."

"Please not to hurry yourself on my account, Mrs Thorne."

Mrs Thorne glanced at the quiet face with eyes drooped downwards to the pages penned by Carlyle, his genius utterly beyond the comprehension of Anne's undeveloped intellect, and silently withdrew. Intentional or not, her delay was a very lengthened one; whether it was that she lacked courage to enter into the conversation on which she had resolved, or

whether, as Anne supposed, she were occupied with household matters, Mrs Thorne did not reappear within the next three hours. Anne changed Carlyle for the light-painted pictures of travel, and reproductions of the famous works of art to be found in continental galleries, and enjoyed them ; for her sense of art, though crude and ill-defined, was a sense existent, not imagined merely. But photographs weary one if you are unacquainted with the originals, and find yourself wading through a thicket of scraps, there being no one at hand to whom you can address your frequent, "What is this ?" or "Where is this taken from ?"

Nanny thought if only by her side had been one friend, whose patience and whose interest flagged not in any art-teaching, to help her with his knowledge and his keen discrimination, the morning, counting even closed blinds and scowling puritanical faces lowering from the walls, would have been among the most perfect and charming of her life. As it was, she shut the folio with a sigh, put it back religiously in the exact spot in which she had found it, and after pacing the room anew, touching tenderly several trifles—bits of

Venetian glass and curious mosaics, a tiny statuette by Thorvaldsen, prized, she knew, especially by Percy—her longing and her weariness led her to the piano, and she timidly struck the disused keys, growing bolder, till the waves of air vibrated throughout the dingy, still apartment. Whilst she played, she fixed her eyes—beautiful eyes, like a gazelle's, shy and dark and lustrous, though the darkness was the concentration of blue light—upon a portrait hung above the instrument—the portrait of Beethoven as an old man.

“It is undoubtedly a strong face,” she thought, looking at it as she reproduced fragments of his intellectual music. “What a genius was there! I wish it were his portrait as a youth. I should like to know what he seemed then to women—before his brow was furrowed, his cheeks and chin heavy, his hair grey. Papa must have looked differently long ago, when Mamma fell in love with him. I don't think I could have loved Beethoven as Julia did, had I lived in his time and known him.”

Possibly not. All that Anne knew of Ludwig Beethoven and Giuletta Guicciardi had

been told her in these dusky autumn nights by Percy ; and Percy's finely-cut delicate face contrasted strongly with the portrait of the musician's in his old age. There was no representation of Beethoven at an earlier period of his existence about the house ; and this spirit of regenerativeness, the wish to reproduce and know the faces of the dead as they appeared to others, so strong in Anne, had often roused Percy's rare laugh at her expense.

In music and mathematics, time flies. When Mrs Thorne again showed herself, handsomely dressed, a piece of knitting in her hand, Anne closed the instrument with regret. She was astonished to see her hostess seat herself prepared to work ; never before had she beheld associated with Mrs Thorne such a womanly occupation.

"Will you not allow me to pull up one of the blinds?" she said, standing up to do it.

"No, thank you," replied the mistress of the Poplars ; "I always like a subdued light."

"So do I, but not when I am working," said Anne, balancing her fairy figure on the edge of an antique chair of the Empire, think-

ing that this verged more on darkness than what is generally understood by the poetic term subdued light, recalling gorgeous stained-glass panes through which the excluded sun pours his vial of colour upon aisles of stone enriched by Gothic arch and pillar.

"I'm afraid you will break the arm of that chair," was Mrs Thorne's next sentence.

Anne quietly—she was accustomed to her friend's brusqueness—deserted the seat of the Empire for one of commoner kind ; she opened again the "Life of Frederick the Great."

"Shall I read on?"

Mrs Thorne glanced up from her knitting, a troubled look in her eagle-like eyes.

"No, thank you. I am not in reading vein this morning," then she despised herself for the equivocation ; "I mean, I would talk with you, rather than read. I have something to say."

Her manner was flustered, her usually decisive tones faltered strangely. Anne shut the volume, laying it aside ; folding her hands in her lap, she awaited composedly Mrs Thorne's communication.

"You can possibly guess to what I am about to refer?" queried Mrs Thorne, knitting fast.

It was so difficult to be cruel whilst Nanny sat opposite, sweeter to look at than the white bud in her hair, with a dear little calm face, as pure as an angel's, with just a madonna-like tinge of earthliness, the faintest hint of human anxiety and sorrow written on her brow. But when Mrs Thorne said in icy coldness, "You can guess to what I am about to refer," shame kindled hot beneath the transparent skin, and Anne looked that which she felt, an indignant daughter, whose whole spirit stands up in rebellion against the injury done a beloved name.

"You might spare me," she said, struggling to be polite ; "I cannot bear to hear it again, Mrs Thorne. You said you will not have my father's name mentioned, without telling me why. I shall know it all when I go home to-morrow. Last night you so excited, so distressed me, I did not close my eyes. I felt as if I must fly to him at once and hear the truth from his dear lips. It was only the remembrance of your kindness to me, believe me, that kept me back."

Her voice trembled, but she steadied it ; her eyes sought Mrs Thorne's.

"You mistake me ; I had then no intention

to refer to your father, Miss Bloomfield. Now that we are alone, I have no objection to tell you the truth. It is a trifle. I confess I exaggerated the matter last night, in my irritation."

"Thank you." Anne spoke quietly, but firmly.

Her friend looked at her beneath her jetty brows.

"It was not on this subject, however, that I wished to speak, Miss Bloomfield. I referred to my son."

Nanny neither started nor blushed; she made it, by her self-possession, her innate dignity, so hard to Mrs Thorne to speak, as, be the consequences what they might, she had predetermined. This was only the second time in her life Mrs Thorne had sacrificed her conscience, had deliberately used falsehood as means to justify an end.

"You will allow that Percy was excited—was unreasonably rude to me before you—was incoherent, passionate last night?"

"I did not understand his mood," honestly said Anne, lowering her eyes; "but I noticed nothing unusual."



"Indeed ! Do you think this is my son's habitual conduct towards me ?"

Anne was silent for a moment.

"Not entirely, Mrs Thorne."

"You are very cautious in your replies, Miss Bloomfield. You need not be afraid of wounding my sensitiveness." Until now, Anne had not considered sensitiveness one of her friend's attributes. "I shall not flinch to hear you say you consider my son unlike all other sons in his bearing towards his mother."

"I think he is much more attentive than most sons," murmured Anne.

"True, he can minister to small necessities ; when he likes he can be gentle and thoughtful as a woman ; when he is in good humour, he can be entertaining, interesting, delightful. You have found this out, perhaps ?"

"Yes," said Anne, blushing deep.

"But he is rash as a boy ; he wants judgment, common sense ; with him generosity is a fault, self-sacrifice the same."

Anne listened quietly ; it was not her province to contradict these hot, quickly poured out words.

"He is sensitive beyond comprehension ; he

has done the most foolish things to alleviate what he imagined to be sensitive pain in others, utterly forgetful of his own interest, his position even, a thing men should never forget."

"I admire him for it," breathed Anne.

"Of course you do ;" something like insolence barbed her tongue. "Would you admire in him direct opposition to his mother's will, to her maturer judgment, Miss Bloomfield?"

"I do not know. I think that would depend on the reason for his opposition. But, Mrs Thorne, he loves you so dearly, he would never oppose you in reality."

"Loves me dearly, did you say?" questioned Mrs Thorne, moved. "Are you sure of that?"

"Quite."

"But you think there is room for other love in his heart?" She glanced furtively above her rows of ill-counted stitches.

"It would be a little heart that could only love one," replied Anne, confused, scarce knowing what she said.

"Miss Bloomfield, I am a proud woman. I let my pride down before you in these questions. But I am a mother. I have only one child, one thing to fill up my whole craving

hungry heart—my poor, deformed, ill-favoured boy.”

“Hush !” gently spoke Anne. “Are you not ungrateful, Mrs Thorne ? He is so cultivated, so refined—he has such a beautiful face.”

“Let me continue,” cried the stern, agitated woman. “You are young, you have a life before you ; I only a few years comparatively. There are so many chances open to you for happiness, you will not miss this one. You do not feel anything but pity for this boy of mine, who cannot cross a room without calling attention to his lagging gait—that halting uneven step that art even cannot remedy—that half emaciated, stunted frame. Tell me, you pity him, Miss Bloomfield ?”

“Yes.” Anne spoke calmly by effort.

“I thought so—I knew it”—triumph flashed in her eye—“but I led him to suppose otherwise. You do not know what it is to have an only child ; how jealous it makes you of that child’s affection. I supposed you angled for him, as girls will do at times, who haven’t any position themselves—no money. You know it was natural I should think so. I did not know your father kept you ignorant of his debts ; and

it would be a good thing for him, for you all, if you made a fair match. Last night I hinted this to Percy. Something called up Mr Bloomfield's name that angered me, and I was wild, and said things I'm sorry for now, my dear. He went off to his room, believing that, whether in love or not, you would be glad to marry him."

Anne stood up trembling.

"Mrs Thorne, what does all this mean?"

Mrs Thorne plied her needles fast; she could not bear to look into that woe-begone, frightened face.

"It means that Percy, who has a knight-errant notion of honour, imagines he has enchained your affections, or given you cause to hope; and he believes there is nothing now left honourably for him to do, but to make you an offer of marriage."

Anne grew deadly pale; she sat down again; her teeth chattered with agitation.

"He need not imagine the form necessary," she said.

"I thought you would say so—you are a sensible woman, Miss Bloomfield." Because Anne neither wept nor fainted, Mrs Thorne

fancied she did not suffer. "I can trust you with my confidence ; yours too will be safe with me."

She waited a moment ; her guest could have been not more still had she been carved in stone.

"And, my dear, if Percy broaches this matter to you, as I suppose he will, what will you say ?"

"I do not know," replied Anne ; then she started, and her hands covered her face. "I do not know. O God ! what shall I do ?"

Mrs Thorne put down her knitting, and tried to withdraw the crossed little hands.

"Your own good sense had best dictate, my dear. If I may offer advice, I tell you plainly it would be a thing contrary to the happiness of both."

"I do not need your advice, Mrs Thorne." There were sobs in Anne's voice,—self-control was deserting her. "I shall not marry your son. He need not think his honour demands such a sacrifice."

"Shall I tell him this, my dear ? It might save you both a painful interview. It is so well to avoid pain when we conveniently can."

Anne sat still, rigidly still; the fountain of her tears was frozen: untutored as she was in worldliness, no worldly woman could have borne so great a shock with calmer aspect. As in the shifting kaleidoscope numberless figures strike the eye in a moment, so in that moment all the minute shivered atoms of her happy moments, of her castles in the air, struck direct to Anne's heart. She understood now, the literal truth of his allusion to the "gift that was hers alone to give." It would be a request dictated not by love, but by honour—honour without love—the "mere escutcheon," Shakespeare termed it—the paltry painted symbol of a thing that existed not. What could he think of her? How low he must hold her! what a mean place she must take in his estimate of women! Nay, what had his mother with cruel tongue proclaimed just now? "I sought the marriage—I laid traps—I deceived—a good thing for us all—my father in debt—to whom?—to him, perhaps, the very man who, for his honour's sake, would have lifted me out of the mud—would have given me the dear name of wife—a mockery, an insult." Anne started up, facing Mrs Thorne; the

stillness of her voice was unnatural, the light blazing in her dilated eyes accorded ill with the measured quiet of her speech.

"Yes!"—she was answering the timely question, struggling desperately to keep the little flicker of pride burning in the presence of this woman—"you may do so. Tell your son that Anne Bloomfield has no wish to be his housekeeper."

In this reply, as she judged, she had answered all. "Should I refuse him, if I cared simply for his name?" she argued. "Would it matter to me whether I were dear to him above all other women, if I sought only for a home, for daily bread well buttered, marrying him that I might scatter his money to my relatives? God knows I love him. Because I love him, purely and unselfishly, I shall say No, calmly, decidedly; yes, even if the struggle break my heart."

Mrs Thorne in spite of herself started.

"Tell your son that Anne Bloomfield has no wish to be his housekeeper."

She had not expected this, spoken with firm lip and flashing eye and haughty bearing. She had looked for tears, for hysterics,

perhaps, for upbraiding, for entreaty. Before that quietly indignant face, with its proud anger, its wounded feeling, she sat, hard, determined as she was, humiliated, defied. But she had not yet accomplished all—she had yet another thing to ask. Mrs Thorne had never stepped within the confines of a theatre ; actors and actresses, she had lived in the belief, were, as a class, profligate, wicked, ungodly ; the stage inculcated immoral lessons ; to act was to forfeit caste in heaven. Never had her son, in Germany or France or England, succeeded in his endeavours to tear up this rooted prejudice. But never had actor or actress masked feeling as Mrs Thorne masked it now. She again resumed her knitting.

“Very well, my dear. Your message is so short ; I shall remember it, without detraction or addition.”

She smiled over her stitches. Anne’s lip quivered visibly for the first time ; she turned her face, moving in the direction of the door.

“You are not going yet ?” anxiously put Mrs Thorne.

“Not if you wish me to remain.”

“Perhaps you have something better to do

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than to talk to me? I'm afraid the morning has been very unpleasant to you?"

"I have to collect my things. I wish to pack my box."

"But, my dear, you are not leaving us until to-morrow."

"I leave you, if quite convenient, to-day. I would rather not meet your son again," she added, truthfully, weighed down by a strong sense of the injustice done her character.

Mrs Thorne exulted,—she breathed freely.

"I should like you to do what you think best; you have much more judgment than I supposed. You have the face of a child—you have the heart and brain of an experienced woman."

What a brave woman, in the mould of one so fragile and so tender to look upon, with that angelic, innocent face—called to-day to wear an expression such as possibly shadowed the angel's who turned Adam and Eve out of the gates of paradise—she knew not. Patient, awaiting further permission to depart, Anne stood in the doorway.

"You would like me to drive you home after lunch? Percy, it is probable, will not return

till late this evening. Once more, to refer to our disagreeable topic—which I hope we shall put by for ever after to-day—if Percy should persist in carrying out his resolve, and ask you to be his wife, you'll tell him, my dear, that you don't love him?"

Anne retraced her steps direct to Mrs Thorne's side ; clasping her hands, the tears streaming down her poor white face, passion-working as it now was, she said, tremulously—

"No ; I could not tell him a lie. I should not dare to perjure my conscience to any one. I should not dare, of all, to answer Percy with a lie."

"You love him ?" cried his mother, sharply.

"Oh, yes !" wept Anne.

"And you will tell him so ?—my boy ! my son !"

Her tones were almost fierce. Here was everything undone.

"Not unless he ask me ;"—Anne tried to stop crying ;—"but if he ask me, I must tell him the truth."

The mother sat speechless ; at length she found words.

"I have mistaken you, Miss Bloomfield.

You will sacrifice your pride so far as to confess an attachment unreturned? You will elicit from my son a sacrifice that the devotedness of your life never could atone? You will rob me, by a wicked intrigue, of which, even mentally, I could not have believed you capable, of my one treasure, my dull heart's solace, my own ewe lamb? Promise me that you will swear to my son you do not love him?"

Anne, surprised, frightened, was firm to her first statement.

"If asked, I must tell the truth. Why," she added, bewildered, "should I not? It will go through me like a sword to confess it; but if I love him, I love him, and I simply could not deny it to his face."

"Impertinent girl! insolent as cruel," blazed forth the woman, foiled only by a tender delicate child's adherence to the truth. "You assert your self-righteousness to my son's ruin. Pretending to be saintlike, you yet carry your point. I tell you you shall not. I will never sanction it—never. He gets not a farthing. He is utterly dependent on me. The property is all mine—mine saving his few paltry hundreds. I married his father with nothing—a fool's

match. I rued it. I suffered as you, with your ignorance of the sin of society, could neither imagine, nor credit, if imagined; and of this black miserable marriage I have nothing that is left me as condonement but my son. I am a proud old woman. Trouble inconceivable to you has whitened my hair and blanched all my life; but in spite of my pride and of my age, Miss Bloomfield, I could bend my knees to you, if that would move you. If you take my son from me, what will my life, and his, and yours too be? I shall suffer desolation, you and he destitution. What have you—what are you, that you should be Percy Thorne's wife? Can you give him, if I draw my purse-strings, all that he needs as his life—luxury, ease, refinement? See! I implore you—I go down upon my knees to you.”

It was true! In the dark, heavily-draped drawing-room, in her own house, she knelt, whited-haired, to Anne Bloomfield. The child shuddered, wept.

“Madam, this is wrong. I cannot bear to see you. What have I done to deserve your reproaches, your threats? O dear Mrs Thorne! get up, please. This is terrible!”

Not very tragic her simple words, but something strange and tragic in the scene ;— these two women, the elder kneeling, the younger with weak hands striving to raise her to her feet ; weary shadows within, faces frowning down upon them from the walls, and driving rain without.

“Not yet, Anne ; I will not rise until you give me your word that you will not rob me of my son.”

Her word only ; the unbending honesty of the child's nature asserted itself ; in the struggle it had been engraved as though in steel upon Mrs Thorne's memory, to remain there ineffaceable for ever. A new light dawned upon Anne.

“You do not want me to marry your son ? I will not marry him, at least never contrary to your wish. I have told you so before. I cannot help my love ; you cannot help yours. It ought to plead with you for mine. Dear Mrs Thorne, he cannot marry me if I will not, even though he should discover that I loved him.”

The mother rose then, taking the wee figure into her arms ; her tears fell on Anne's face.

"You are deceiving me. No! I am sure you cannot deceive. I am passionate—I am hard enough at times, I know, but I have a heart, Anne Bloomfield. Had I none, I should not have refrained from worrying your father all these years about his trumpery notes. You mean what you say. Yes, yes; I believe you. I respect you, Anne Bloomfield. I hope to know you more."

Anne freed herself from the embrace.

"Our acquaintance ends here," she said, firmly. "I do not come into the Poplars again, Mrs Thorne. Oh! I wish I had never known you nor your son! I wish you knew how you have made my heart burn! But I do not mean to say much. I begin to suspect you have been kinder to us than ever Molly and I guessed."

"As to that,"—Mrs Thorne was regaining her composure,—"the least said the better. It is a trifle you need not trouble yourself with knowing."

"I shall know it from papa. I would rather know it from him." Anne felt that to hear it from Mrs Thorne's lips would be insupportable to her lacerated pride. "I suppose I may go now."

Mrs Thorne took her hand and looked close into the chiselled face.

"My dear; I should like to ask you to forgive me."

The blood mounted to Anne's temples.

"For your son's sake, I will try," she falteringly said.

"I am afraid you will think miserably of your visit?"

"Yes; I can never forget this morning. I *may* forgive it. You have thought and said bitter things to me, Mrs Thorne; not only to me, but of me."

"It was my weakness, my jealousy, Anne. Can you not make allowance for that?"

"No!" Anne's voice trembled. "I can never understand any woman's deliberate, determined injury of another. I am a very young woman compared to you, Mrs Thorne; but I am old enough to feel being slandered. May I say good-bye now, please? I wish to leave at once."

"But you will wait for lunch?"

"I can eat nothing."

"And I thought of driving you home myself."

Then Anne spoke the final sentence of the few in which she had notified any resentment of her personal injury ; it went straight to Mrs Thorne's heart.

"I have no mother ; she is dead. You refuse to let me call you so. I might have done so. I am alone for all my life. I will go back alone, thank you. It would be giving you trouble to drive me in the wet, and it would be pain to me. Good-bye!"

She held out her hand ; it shook violently, it was quite cold. Mrs Thorne touched it lightly ; more she could not. To bend her cruel lips, perjured with slander, to that pure forehead, she did not dare. So they parted.



## CHAPTER VI.

### MR BLOOMFIELD'S CONFESSION TO HIS GIRLS.

THE evening of the same day, Anne, in the sheltering dimness of the gloaming, opened her troubled heart to her father. It was a heart full of woe, poor child! Home in time to see Molly previous to her exodus, she observed a change in both their dear faces—a change that alarmed her in the one, and called forth tearful, silent sympathy in the other. The sisters sat side by side, the old man reposed in his easy-chair, the fire crackled in the grate.

“Papa, dear,” spoke the firm voice of little Anne, and tenderly in the dusky twilight the lustrous, anxious eyes sought the old school-master’s; “don’t go to sleep.”

“No, my darling? Well, I’ll keep awake if you like. I thought you two would have a lot to say to each other, and a good deal you’d like me to shut my ears to.”

“I want to talk to you, Dadds dear.”

"That will be infinitely better to me than forty winks, then, eh, Molly? So long since we two have had our wise woman to harness us to order. We'll have to be pretty careful of our p's and q's now, Moll." And he rubbed his eyes and sat erect.

"I'm afraid it's not going to be exactly pleasant chat," began Anne, sadly, courageously resolved, however hard to do it, to face the unknown trouble.

"Then hadn't we better put it off till to-morrow?" proposed Mr Bloomfield, unsuspecting, and procrastinating as usual. "This is your first evening and Molly's last, and Molly wants cheering up, Anne. We mustn't be encouraging her blues, you know."

Anne stretched out her hand and clasped Molly's tight.

"No, dear; but I think it's right she should know too, and I'm afraid, Dadds, we can't put it off any longer."

"What are you talking about?"

Molly spoke a little curiously, and accompanied her words by triplets of kisses, bending her head to the fingers clasping hers.

"Yes; what *are* you talking about?"

jokingly echoed Mr Bloomfield, beginning to "smell a rat," for all his attempt at fun, and awakening to a consciousness of the truth.

"I should like to know, Papa dear, what reason Mrs Thorne has for her strange allusions to you and Mamma. We are under some obligation to them, are we not? She hinted a standing debt; at least, I guessed as much."

She brought out her revelation quietly in a breath. Molly sat bolt upright, flushing hot with curiosity; she felt Anne's fingers growing hot and cold alternately. The Professor was silent, looking into the fire. At last he said—

"My little woman, why trouble yourself about the past, with which you have nothing to do? I'll have a talk with Mrs Thorne."

He spoke as if the fact of his holding converse with the lady of the Poplars would be more than sufficient to annihilate the difficulty.

"We are grown up now," went on Anne, steadily; "why should we not know? The very fact of being your little women, instead of just your little girls, ought to give us the right to share all your troubles. And we shall think it so much worse than it is if you don't tell, and nothing is so hard to bear as uncertainty."

Mrs Thorne would have told me, but I refused to hear. I could not bear to hear anything against you from a stranger, dear Dadds. Whatever you have withheld from us in our childhood, we shall learn sooner or later; why not now?"

Molly wrapped her shawl about her, thinking, in her simple-heartedness, "This is like a novel. I wonder what the secret can be?" and half longing that it might be something very strange and exciting.

Mr Bloomfield yet attempted to pass it off as a joke.

"Pooh! pooh! You're only children yet. Be sure it will be all right by and by. Why, I think I'll have my change now. Sure it's my time, eh, Moll? Yes, yes, yes! I'll pay a visit to the Poplars, and I won't have you jealous, mind you, Nanny."

Anne judged it best to speak out the hard truth.

"No, dear Dadds; you cannot go to the Poplars. Mrs Thorne told me to my face she would not have your name mentioned."

"What a wretch! How did she dare! Why, it was quite an insult!" cried Molly, hugging Nanny round the neck.

The Professor turned his bald head away from the tell-tale flame ; presently little snorts, indicative of swallowed tears, issued from the dusky corner into the which he had wheeled back his chair.

“ Ah, my dears ! you won’t think badly of me when I’m dead and gone,” he whimpered, rubbing his eyes with his great square blue silk pocket-handkerchief,—“ although people may try now to prejudice you against your fond old father.” Then between vigorous use of the blue square and little pauses, “ I think it’s nigh time my days were ended if strangers may abuse me to my girls.”

This bit of sentimentality brought them to his side in a moment. Molly sat herself down on the hearthrug at his feet, crossing her hands on his knees and looking up into his face ; Anne stood behind his chair, and her soft little fingers stole caressingly round his neck.

“ I wish somebody’d abuse you to me, Dadds !” fired Miss Molly, with flashing eye. “ Wouldn’t I give it them gloriously !” Colour, as she spoke, overspread her cheek, giving it back a semblance of its peachy bloom.

“ Why do you say such foolish things ?” said

Anne, tearfully, brushing her face close to her father's. "You know that we have no one in the world but you—Molly and I."

The truth struck home, it jarred on Molly's sensitive nerves in a moment. Just a tone—a look—serves often to unlock the flood-gates of young trouble. She leaned her head against her Dadd's knee, sobbing. He stroked her silken hair with rare tenderness.

"Hush ! hush, my sweet wee woman—dear little girl ! Stop Molly ! not so fast, not so fast, Miss ! or I shall begin crying too, and then what a pair of fools we shall look ! Nanny will have a good laugh at us."

How inexpressibly grateful was the poor child for this interpretation of her grief !

"And it's nothing so very dreadful after all, my dear," went on the Professor ; "it's only a little debt, as Nanny, says—a mere drop in the ocean to Mrs Thorne."

"But to us ?" Anne Bloomfield held her point courageously.

"To us—well," he hesitated, "it's—it's a good deal."

"How much ?"

"Three hundred pounds."

If he had named the sum at three thousand sterling, the effect on these two girls could not have been more appalling. Molly found her feet, echoing his words amazed; overwhelmed with a sense of shame and sorrow, Anne stood speechless; unconsciously she unloosed the clasp of her hands about his neck. He perceived it instantly.

"Yes, yes! I'm not fit to touch; you're ashamed of me. I knew how 'twould be—I hinted it to Molly there. No censure will be too hard for me. I deserve it. But we can't always bear what we deserve, my children; and I'm an old man, and my life's come down to the snuff of the candle."

This time, sentiment failed to drag forth their pretty tenderness for him. They were both too much astonished to utter even their surprise in words. Molly walked up and down the room, her one burning thought, "I might have paid it off for the poor old man, if I had married Thorold, perhaps." Anne stood perfectly still, tears stealing their way through her depressed eyelids. In her keener perception of character, she read that which Molly failed even to conceive possible—her father's

dishonesty. Not an attempt made all these years to economise or put by even the value of a newspaper, a glass of wine—no sign of conscience-conflict—not the dedication of a moment, as far as she dared judge, to the consideration of an obligation that, in her proud high-mindedness, she considered overwhelming to degradation. Not less sharply either did she feel the charity of the Thornes, and her own ignorance of the fact that throughout the lapse of months they had never by note or word breathed the faintest suspicion that such a debt as this existed.

“How came you to borrow the money?” she said, presently.

Mr Bloomfield wiped his eyes, and tenderly took hold of her fingers ; intuitively he seemed to feel which of the two young maidens would the more greatly suffer in consequence of his confession.

“It was more your mother’s doing than mine, dear. God knows I don’t mean to shift the blame from my old shoulders to one who is gone.”

“No,” Anne interrupted ; “I blame no one. How should I dare ? Why did you borrow the money ?—that is all I want to know.”



"I must repeat, Nanny, that it was your mother's doing."

"What could mamma want to beg three hundred pounds for?" interrogated Molly, coming back to her seat on the rug, a ring of scorn in her voice. "And why did you let her do it, foolish old Dadds?"

"I was averse to it," said Mr Bloomfield. "I opposed it as long as I could; but your mother liked to have her own way, Molly."

"Papa!" spoke Anne, quietly, yet her low tones trembled; "this is not just to one who is dead. Had she no good reason?"

"Yes, indeed, poor darling. It was at the time when you were born, Molly. Reasons enough she had for asking help, your dear mother; but we were unwise; we were neither of us prudent people, and she was just a giddy, young, harum-scarum creature. You're her duplicate, Moll, as near as can be; and until she married me, dears, she'd never taken in the value of money."

"Was she rich?" curiously asked Molly. "I always thought she was just as poor as we are."

"Poverty was no stranger to her, I tell you.

When she took my name, Moll, I brought her away from luxury and ease and happiness. I ought never to have done it. I believe it killed her—her anxious, troubled life. But she loved me ; it was strange how she loved me.”

The voice fell, the old man's tears gathered thick.

“Not strange at all,” purred Molly, nestling her head against his knee, fondly. “I'm sure you were very handsome.”

“No ; I was never handsome, I know,” smiled Mr Bloomfield. “But, girls, your mother was. She was tall—she swayed in movement like a reed—she was grace personified. She chose to carry all her elegance and her youthful mirth into my dingy little school. Heaven bless her for it !”

“And you failed ?” Anne said.

“Ah ! the money.” Mr Bloomfield started from the reverie of a moment. “You see, no one wanted her to marry me. Her uncle was a wealthy old screw—he loved his ducats with a Shylock affection—he never would have dowered her, and my mediocrity was his excuse for refusing to consent to our marriage. She came to me at last—we waited two years—but

time only hardens some hearts. It was, I suppose, what you would call romantically, a runaway match."

Molly laughed ; she could not help it. It was so difficult to associate anything so stirring as an elopement, no matter how humbly effected, with this bald-headed, wrinkled, furrowed-browed father.

Anne sighed. She pictured the lovely, graceful girl flying to her lover's arms from the hothouse refinement of wealth, and fading fast in the chilling atmosphere of poverty—sombre truth framed the picture.

"Yes ; we had a coach, and we drove to the next railway town, and there we got married. Well ! well ! 'twas a happy time, but short enough."

Then, by sudden effort, as if the main subject of this chat had escaped him, he reverted to the debt. "When you were coming, Molly, your mother got a letter from her brother, a wild scapegoat of a fellow in the something Dragoon Guards—I forget the number—telling her of some wonderful shares, in a coal company, he had purchased, which were to bring him in no end of money, and begging her to invest

before the shares rose any higher. She wrote back word that she had nothing, my dear, to invest; and true enough it was; but he bothered and bothered, and so deluded us, that at last she induced me to borrow the sum from Mrs Thorne. Mrs Thorne has my I O U now, my dears, for three hundred pounds, unless she's torn it up or lost it. I think sometimes that's why she never troubles me by alluding to it."

"No," said Anne, her face hot. "Surely your word alone, in that case, would be as binding. You don't mean, papa, if the note—I don't understand what the note means—is lost, that you would never pay her, because you could not be compelled to do so, legally speaking? You would be the more strongly bound, don't you think, by the law of your own conscience; for, Dadds, moral law is only conscience, and conscience dare not repudiate honesty."

"Hear the lawyer!" Mr Bloomfield, like Charles II., could not resist his jocoseness even were he dying. "Conscience, for matter of that, Anne, means often education."

Molly looked at Anne's distressed face.

"Dadda, dear, whether the note is lost or not, you'll pay Mrs Thorne, won't you?"

"I should be very happy to pay her," Mr Bloomfield said, composedly, "if it were in my power. It isn't that I won't, I simply can't."

"It *must* be paid," Anne spoke, with quivering lip. "It is a disgrace to us. We are both young and strong; we must do something." Her voice broke; their utter incapability for work dawned miserably upon her mind.

"But didn't you make a fortune out of the coal shares," queried Molly, gazing into the fire, less from curiosity than from wish to break the sad silence that had crept in painfully.

"No!" Mr Bloomfield was as near passionate utterance as they had ever known him. "The rascally scheme failed, of course. We lost every single farthing—the three hundred and my school savings likewise. The shock came just before your birth, Molly. Our poverty was extreme; our anxiety worse. It was too much for your mother. Now you know quite as much as you need, my poor little women."

"We must save—we must lower all our expenses," hurriedly breathed Anne. "The trouble must have been overwhelming, mad-

dening ; but now it is time to struggle, to give back the money that was not ours to risk."

"How can we ?" practically put Molly. "We are so poor as it is. We don't eat too much. I'm sure we don't spend much on our clothes. My trunk full of visiting garments, that stands packed in the passage, wouldn't fetch four pounds, I think, if I sold it all."

"What became of our uncle?" said Anne. "Could he not help us?"

"That would be only borrowing again," replied Mr Bloomfield, truly. "We have no claim on him. He sold out of the Guards, and went to the bush, I believe."

"I wish I were a man," Molly exclaimed, fiercely; "I'd hunt him out, and thrash him ever so savagely."

Mr Bloomfield lifted her hand to the flickering light of the flame, and spanned her tiny wrist.

"Can this belong to the being who says such arrogant things? Look at it, Nanny; it's like a bit of waxwork. My girls take after their mother in their limbs and faces. Well, well! to be sure, you may both marry rich men, and then you'll retrieve your poor old father's honour."

Was it fate? What was it that at that moment brought the sound of carriage-wheels to the garden-gate? Molly sprang up excited.

"Why, I believe they've come for me to-night. How odd!"

Pleasure brought carmine richly to her cheeks. Anne's heart beat, her fingers wreathed themselves together, icily cold. They listened to the unfastening of the gate; steps approached the door. It seemed that scarcely had the well-known footfall struck upon Anne's ear than the figure of Percy Thorne painted itself on her retina.

"Anne!"

"Percy—Mr Thorne!"

She found herself standing, her hand in his. How it happened she could hardly tell; there was a knock—confused feet—light glimmered in the doorway of the little drawing-room, shed dimly by the heralding dip-candle carried by old Betty; it disappeared, and in the dusk she faced him. It was like a dream.

"Papa—Molly, this is Mr Thorne."

He let her fingers fall; he had held them tightly, fast locked in his own; they burned now,—a glow that went up to her temples, and

flamed in her eyes; the beautiful sense of exquisite happiness, delirious almost, passed, and consciousness and pain, sharp as real, returned. She sought a chair away from him; she marked his manner to her father, courteous and bright; noting too, his countenance, faintly illumined by the gaseous spark emitted by the coals, as he addressed himself to Molly; and, like a triumph gorgeously burst, the conviction that in his regard, as in his greeting, she was first. With something of amazement, too, she watched Mr Bloomfield and her sister; how natural they were, how perfectly at ease, how completely the former pocketed reflection and uneasiness with his china-silk handkerchief; how cheerful he was, how evenly flowed his words; and Molly in the same way had seemingly thrown away, though probably only for the time being, the grief they had mutually drank of a moment or so ago, and was looking almost gay, and how lovely with the red in her cheeks and the smile upon her full ripe lips!

"My mother hopes to renew her acquaintance, Mr Bloomfield," spoke Percy, as a matter of course seating himself near Anne's retired chair, "and commissioned me to express the



hope with her kind regards to you. I fancy she has travelled about enough, sacrificing home comfort to my erratic habits, and will enjoy the old neighbourhood's undisturbed tranquillity in consequence."

Anne heard, astonished. Two thoughts clashed. "They will think I have exaggerated—I have not told the truth," referring to her own circle; and contemporaneously, "I have given her my promise that I will never marry her son. She can afford to be kind."

"Very kind! I shall be delighted," pleasantly said the Professor, rubbing his hands gleefully; then he winked in the exuberance of his spirits to Molly, saying, "Let's have the candles, my dear. This light prevents us from seeing Mr Thorne's face, and he can't see us, you know."

"Well, that is a drawback certainly," quietly smiled Percy; "but I confess to a decided penchant for this ghostly twilight—gloaming, as the Scotch term it. Pray do not trouble yourself to stir, Miss Mary. Your sister, I know by experience, has an affection for obscurity."

Anne coloured, remembering their evenings at the Poplars, the quiet talk interluded by her

playing and their mingled voices, in the semi-darkness. But Mr Bloomfield imagined that Percy would perhaps suppose they grudged him an end of candle, and insisted on his motion being carried. Molly rose to transfer the order to Betty—bell-wires were little used here; the stranger held the door open for her till she passed, then closing it gently, he resumed his place beside the elder daughter.

"I should not have ventured this uncere-  
monious visit," he said to her, "had you not  
driven me to it, Miss Bloomfield. You had no  
right to go. It was a bit of feminine caprice.  
You know my mother's arguments; her pros and  
cons do not always tally with facts. Do you  
forget what I said to you in parting, when you  
were playing Ophelia?"

"No."

Mr Bloomfield commenced stirring the fire  
vigorously.

"By the by, I found your rose torn to pieces  
in the drawing-room. You destroyed it; ac-  
knowledged destruction isn't it? It was but a  
bud, and unopened petals do not fall."

"Yes, I tore it to pieces."

Anne confessed the truth bluntly, remem-

bering how in her agony she had unconsciously pulled it from her hair, and ripped the pale leaves from the calyx separately in her nervous passion.

"I'm glad you tell me so honestly. I put no faith in superstitions, but I put faith in the truth of your character. You might have pulled it to fragments whilst reading; anyhow, I do not blame you. Still, there was a compact to the which I hold you bound. I give you back your apple to-morrow, you remember, and I ask for something in lieu of it. Mahomet must come to the mountain. You will see me to-morrow?"

"Oh, not to-morrow!" cried Anne. How could she bear two such struggles, with no intervening time to pray for strength?

"Why not to-morrow?"

The whole truth could not be spoken here; silent a moment, she replied—

"Molly leaves home, and I shall be too busy."

"Too busy!—for an hour—for thirty minutes! You will not vouchsafe me that even? You grudge me your moments?"

"I grudge you nothing; but, Mr Thorne, I

cannot see you to-morrow. Come the day after, if you will come at all."

"Well, I come the day after, in the evening. Then your parcelled seconds, your mapped out time, will not be interfered with. Should you play me false, and wilfully 'forget,' I shall never forgive you, Miss Bloomfield."

Molly came back then, Betty following with the lights. Two bright spots showed on Anne's pale cheeks ; she was beautiful to look at ; the confused emotion of deep-set pain and some indefinable conscious happiness enamelled itself in her face. Talk she could not ; she sat still, rigid, bending her head over a morsel of needle-work. But what woman in love can control her eyes ? They met his repeatedly, falling angrily after each *rencontre*. Some time he stayed, chatting pleasantly to Mr Bloomfield and Molly, by some delicate sense seemingly aware that Anne preferred to be left thus quietly apart. Only in rising to depart did he again address her ; then he laid a small wooden-box on the table, close to her hand.

"In town to-day I had occasion to hunt up an old curiosity friend, and I chanced, whilst looking over his stores, to light upon a bodily

impersonation of a wish I have heard you express. You will tell me the day after to-morrow what you think of it. I should like to know."

Mr Bloomfield accompanied him to the carriage, waiting without the gate. And Anne removed the lid, concealing the translated wish.

Tears came flood-wise to her eyes. How thoughtful for her he had been, even in the press of business! She lifted gently one of the pretty minute sculptures of Beethoven as a young man, but she could not see it clearly by reason of that misty veil before her sight.

"Is that all!" said her sister, disappointedly

"Did you wish for that, Nanny?"

"Yes, dear Molly."

## CHAPTER VII.

### LOVE IN A COTTAGE.

ANNE BLOOMFIELD sat mending socks in the oppressive stillness of her own little bedroom. She awaited Percy Thorne; her watch, suspended from a hook above the mantelshelf, pointed the hour—four o'clock. He would be here presently. Laying down her homely work, she went to the looking-glass; smoothing her hair with her hands, for a moment she looked critically at the reflection of her face,—pale, with firm-set mouth and brilliant eyes; and then, drawing something from her breast, a piece of neatly-folded paper, began walking up and down the room, restlessly excited. In her perambulations she re-read the words inscribed, evidently in hurried characters, upon the paper.

“You will remember your promise; I need not lose my faith in your honesty of purpose, Anne Bloomfield. You will not be moved; not be led to act contrary to your judgment, to

your pledged word? I tell you plainly, even should you so far sacrifice your pride as to confess your attachment to a man who does not return it, that I give no consent to my son's marriage with you."

"She knew I could not cross her; that for my father's sake, for very gratitude, I should not thwart her wishes," Anne said bitterly to herself, —too true a woman to recognise that on this very truth another woman was basely trading, knowing that it would never enter Anne's mind to use the letter as a weapon against the sender thereof. "It will be soon over, no doubt."

Listening intently for the sound of wheels, or for the tread of horse's hoofs, she took up her work again. It was a relief, a shield turned against trouble, this courageous determined seeking of occupation; she kept herself thus at least outwardly calm, whatever tempest swept across her fluttering anxious heart. The expected sound struck her ears before Betty came panting up-stairs.

"You're pretty young ladies, to have such a number of gents after ye, and car'ges the live-long day! Ye'll want a man soon, I suppose, to open the door?"

"What is it?" mechanically spoke Anne, folding her socks one within the other.

"My! don't ye be for fooling me with your ignorance. 'Tis well put on, but 'twont deceive me."

Anne looked up quietly, unmoved to blushes by this ill-timed raillery.

"Betty, have you seen Papa?"

"The Master's up to game, and has gone off wi' hisself," grinned Betty, her mood dangerously facetious. "You'll have him all to yourself, young lady, if that's what ye're wanting."

"You are right." Anne's voice was measured and distinct. "I wish you to understand, Betty, that during the time Mr Thorne remains I do not permit any interruption. If you see your master, you may tell him that Mr Thorne's visit is to me, to me exclusively."

Betty showed all her teeth.

"I'm nowise sure I shan't put my ear to the hole of the door," she said. She meant no harm, poor old soul! It was her off-hand, rough-and-ready fashion of speaking to these girls, whom she was apt to regard as babies yet. But her young mistress, for the first time in her life, evinced some sense of her own power.



"You may do so if you please, Betty, I cannot prevent you. I do not forbid you. You may hear the whole conversation if you choose; but if you choose, I must ask you to find another home."

"What! after all these years, for a bit o' fun?" gasped Betty.

"It would be no fun to me."

"Well, to be sure!" ejaculated Betty, adding, half-defiantly, "There's the Master and Miss Molly though."

"I am mistress here;" Anne passed her speaking; "and I will not tolerate a spy in my service. I am sorry to say an unkind thing, but I mean it."

She walked straight out of the room then, down-stairs. At the drawing-room door she hesitated a moment, only a moment; her nerves were strung to their full tension; she went in, and her face was calm.

"How do you do, Mr Thorne?" She had uttered the unmeaning phrase, the doggerel of social parlance, a score of times before and trembled not; but now her tongue faltered, and her cheek grew white; emotion had always the effect of intensifying the statuesque paleness natural to her.

He scanned her closely, wondering at her composure.

"I was only half prepared to find you in and alone. I fancied you might have found occupation that would have banished me from your thoughts, or have yielded to the bewitching sunset, and flown down to the beach. The sea looked orange as I drove here."

"You never believe me." Anne's eyes sought his, gravely reproachful.

"I was born a sceptic. I have never had much reverence for women as women, except perhaps for an over-developed sense of their personal beauty, a virtue I have not at all myself."

Anne sat down on a hard old-fashioned settee they termed a sofa.

"You are worse than satirical, Mr Thorne ; you are bitter."

"Won't you let me finish my confession ? I would tell you that for women I have had little of reverence, little of respect, little of love or faith in their divine simplicity—which I take to mean passive ignorance—until I knew you."

Anne opened her eyes wide.

"I have known only one woman in all my life who was as gentle as she was unpretentious, and

as pure as she was gentlé, who deserved, in fact, the dear appellative of a true woman. I have met more brilliant, more gifted, more captivating women than you, Anne."

"Yes!" faintly : she breathed.

"More accomplished, more beautiful, possibly even more refined."

"That might well be," said Anne, ready to weep disappointed tears.

"But I have never believed in the disinterested goodness—goodness in the abstract—of any woman I have ever met, Anne"—

He paused a second ; he read her face carefully at the words *disinterested goodness*. For the first time she coloured scarlet, remembering his mother's slander of her motives, nay, of her very looks and words, and started.

"Until now," he added.

Anne's lips moved. She would say something, he thought ; they grew still again, wordless as before. He stood directly opposite ; there was room for both on the dingily-covered settee, but he stood yet.

"Only in knowing you, dear Anne, have I known what is the full extent of a possible happiness. Something happened the other night

which determined me to reveal to you a hope so new and strange. I have already hinted it to you in a vague way. See, I have been careful to bring you the apple about which we jested. Will you give me what I seek in return for it?"

He offered her the fruit she had gathered from the lawn of the Poplars the other night; done with a semblance, an outer wrap of badinage, the action conveyed deep signification, and his clear tenor voice fell to the veriest perfection of tenderness. He received no answer; he looked into a face cold and quiet as a piece of chiselled stone, the lips compressed, the eyelids drooped.

"Anne, Anne! are you dumb? You do not fail to comprehend me? Have you lost your voice?"

Then Anne lifted her eyes, and by a gesture of her hand refused his offering.

"My God!" he said, "do we understand each other? What do you mean, Anne?"

"That I have nothing to give you."

There was silence between them—she sitting quiet, her heart at white-heat of suffering; he in mute amazement reading his fate in her calm face, repeating inwardly her decisive tones. He was not a man to insist on the useless iteration

of a sentence that, spoken with condemnatory conciseness, conveyed its import direct to his intelligence. He sent the symbol of discord crashing through the window-pane.

"Thank you, at any rate, for your honesty. Having everything to bestow, you mean you will give nothing, plainly put. If you knew, as you did, the reason of my visit here to-day, why did you allow me to come? Was it that you exulted in a catlike sense of tyranny in your power to inflict pain?"

"I thought," faltered Anne, "Mrs Thorne would have told you"— She hesitated; there was latent passion in his voice she dared not rouse; she was unnerved by it, wholly unprepared to hear him darkly hint his love for her; such fitted ill his mother's given reasons for the offer he had come hither to make.

"Would have told me what, Anne Bloomfield?"

"I left a message with her."

"Yes;" he smiled a little sarcastic bitter smile; it could not refer to her, however, for he took in his one of her cold hands.

"You shiver—there should be a fire here. I heard your message; it was like you, proud and concise. Anne, my mother would have slain me

with her eyes as I sat unromantically swallowing claret and cold mutton, could she have done so. Not for years have I laughed so heartily. You will never be my housekeeper you say; you never need. I do not ask you to spend your life amongst jam-crocks and pickles, to spoil your eyes over choice recipes, to narrow your intellect pandering to gluttonous taste, and weighing pounds and shillings—though I fancied you less averse to these small matters of small life than you in reality seem. But I ask you to be my wife, Anne.”

“It cannot be. I told your mother I would never marry you,” cried Anne, in her despair.

“You told my mother you would never marry me,” he echoed, sharply. “What do you mean? How came you so to predetermine your line of action, to marshal idle words against me in this way? What has my mother to do in the matter? I tell you, nothing, absolutely nothing. There is no voice in the world that has a right to insert a syllable between me and the woman I love.”

He held her hands in a vice.

“You are silent—you dare be honest no longer—you are acting under coercion. Your tongue is tied, perhaps, by threats?”

Alas ! what could she say ? Had he not, peradventure inadvertently, hit upon the truth.

" Anne, I *will* know. I insist on reply. Is my love—perhaps even yours also—to be stemmed by the straw of a woman's opposition ? I demand it as a right. Am I to bare my heart to you, and to get nothing from you but this speechless scorn ? Tell me, you are bound by a promise ? It was extorted from you. Confess ! "

" No ; I gave it of my own free will," said Anne.

" You gave it. That demonstrates the fact that, somehow or other, it was sought. I will not believe that it was not wrung from you—that you hold to it through fear."

" I hold to it,"—Anne met his kindling eye, her own full of tears,—" through gratitude."

He sat down beside her on the dingy settee ; he put his arm around her, perforce he clasped her so that he could read her face. Passion worked in his. She trembled from head to foot ; a giddiness possessed her.

" Through gratitude, you say. You use words with little meaning. No goodness demands payment ; it pays itself. Gratitude ! What passed between my mother and you that calls for a sacrifice so enormous as this ? "

A momentary darkness swept before Anne's vision ; she saw nothing ; she might have fainted but for his supporting arm. Then she spoke the truth out in her bewilderment. "Did you not think it necessary to sacrifice yourself from honourable motives, Mr Thorne ?"

"Ah!" he said, bitterly, "I have the clue now. I left you in a cruel woman's power, and she used it. She tyrannised over you, she traded upon your feelings, she trod down your pride, your respect, she overrode your heart by showing you that worthless bond of your father's. It is for that you give her what you call gratitude. You looked at an incident of the past through a colossal magnifying glass ; you"—

"No!" interrupted Anne ; "I have seen no bond."

"But she hinted it. She made you feel that you were too poor, under too weighty an obligation to her, to cross her selfishness, and marry her son. Confess she did her best to humiliate you ?"

"She went down on her knees to me," recalled Anne, shuddering, but she gave no answer.

"Did she do this, or did she not, Anne ?"

"Partly ; only in part, Mr Thorne. I am



acting responsibly. I am not acting because of threats."

"Threats!"—he caught the word quickly. "You are too transparent to equivocate. I have some right to your confidence."

"Mr Thorne, is it not true that you fancied I looked for an offer of marriage as my due almost—that you supposed I would be glad to marry you whether I loved you or not?"

"You were made to feel that I believed this of you?"

"Yes!" Anne said, blushing. She added nothing to the significant monosyllable.

"And you credited these statements?"

"What else could I do," she said, sobbing at last, the fortification of strong endurance crumbling away, "when I heard you thought these things of me?"

"What things?" The words were drawn out, as it were, between tight-set teeth.

"I cannot tell you."

"Your modesty forbids?"

"Yes! Oh, you do not believe that I am capable of acting such an unwomanly part, do you?" She looked up at his face, tears streaming unchecked down her cheeks.

"Anne!" He drew gently to his shoulder the tiny head—he held her hands yet—he bent his lips to her forehead. "You should have known me better; you should have trusted me more nobly. The scandal breathed against you by my mother, the evening previous to your departure, ran off my mind like water. I set you on the topmost pinnacle of esteem. It is not that I only *would* not associate with your pure nature the ideas my mother outlined, in her shrewd cleverness—it is that I could not. Do you hear? Is there no magnetism between us, that I should repudiate with contempt too great for words, calumny of you, where you listen, crediting, to calumny of me?"

"Oh, no! no! This did not calumniate; it did you honour."

"Honour!" He smiled scornfully. "You misunderstand me utterly. I should consider I dishonoured a woman whom I married for any other motive than the old-fashioned one—love. I stand in awe of no censure whatsoever, therefore the idle tittle-tattle of Mrs Grundy would affect me not a whit. Honour is a relative term. Had I believed you capable of the very common feminine crime of angling for position, for a

home, for a wedding-ring, guilty of marrying without the only thing that sanctifies marriage—affection—I should have very plainly told you that I held you not honourable enough to be the wife of any honourable man.”

He looked down tenderly on the innocent face.

“Lift up your eyes, dear little Anne. Are you afraid now to tell me that you love me?”

She started ; she tried to unclasp his hands, but could not. In the bosom of her dress she carried the letter solemnly adjuring her to remember her promise. She remembered in the same moment the white bowed head, the bended knees, the earnest supplication, “You will not rob me of my son ;” and she said again, distinctly,

“I told your mother I would never marry you.”

“Is such to bind you? Is honour,” bitterly emphasising the word, “so tyrannous, that for one person’s happiness the happiness of two must be sacrificed? I will not take answer so. I conjure you to tell me truth—this, and nothing else. Do you love me? Your denial only can drive me from you. Against your conscience, I dare you to give it.”

He had reached the point where, as she told his mother, she could not meet him with a de-

liberate lie. Could she have done so, have braved truth with the weapon of falsehood, even by one tone, one word, she had effectually closed the contest. She was speechless.

"How am I to read your silence? Have you not voice? Pity me not; I am made of stern stuff, Miss Bloomfield. You may speak as you will."

"I am not free," cried Anne, shivering. "Oh, I beg your pity—I am unhappy—I am wretchedly unhappy!"

"You love me, Anne?"

"Yes."

"It is all I need. I can wait. Sometime hence you will be my wife?"

"Never! never without Mrs Thorne's consent. I gave my word. I owe her so much—we all owe her so much. God would not forgive me if I injured one who has been so good to my father, for my own selfish ends. I know what I must do—teach me to keep to what is right!"

She turned to him in her helpless sorrow; he held her close in strong embrace; his eyes were dim; he kissed her drooped eyelids, her mouth, her brow; love, the passion that cannot be controlled, that breaks the dykes of narrow pro-

priety, that slew Hercules and Samson, gleamed in his face. They were alone, they loved ; circumstance as a thread sundered their lives ; he put her from him on the sofa ; beaded drops stood out upon his forehead.

"I cannot teach—I learn, Anne Bloomfield. I am weak as a split reed—you are strong as stone unhewn in the quarries of Carrara. Listen ! I am unnerved—I tremble like a fool. Until my mother of her own free will seek the daughter she has voluntarily sacrificed, I will strive to spare you the pain of repeating such a scene as this. If you love me, your love will stand the test. You can wait too. Promise me—give me this light to shine on my dark days—that you will be no man's wife, no wife but mine !"

"I promise," she said, smiling through her tears. "And you know," she touchingly added, "I can keep my promises."

## CHAPTER VIII.

### MOLLY'S GOOD-BYE.

"It's a funny fashion of Miss Bloomfield's to walk about alone," said Miss Anstruther, addressing herself to no one in particular, but fixing her calm cold eye upon Selina.

"What do you find *funny* in the circumstance, Jane?" asked Miss Thorold; then, without waiting a reply, "I'm not sure it's quite wise to allow the child to be out so long by herself."

"Well, I didn't mean funny exactly, Selina," plaintively spoke Miss Anstruther.

"Uncommonly dull, I should say," jerked out the General.

"It's odd, that's the word," hammered Jane, who persisted in righting her misapplied speech. "Don't you think it is, General?"

Sir George disliked Miss Anstruther, and in his gruff fashion was fond of Molly; that is, as far as to take any notice of the sex either way was consistent with his principles.

"Don't find it odd myself—rather admire it. Selina, it's getting dark."

"Yes ; and I'm getting anxious."

Miss Thorold evinced her anxiety by moving her chair into the window, from which she could command a view of the road, and of the cliffs beyond.

"Perhaps she's gone to meet her young man," said Jane, slowly. Her fun was always of a very solemn description ; so much so, that the hearer was generally left in doubt as to the real signification of any phrase capable of a double translation. As no one smiled at her joke in this instance, she made up the deficiency by smiling broadly herself.

"I used to think Thorold was gone a little in that direction," the General remarked, seemingly inclined to the condescension of small talk this dull October evening.

"Oh, dear ! why, they've met then, of course," giggled Jane, delighted to think she had hit the right nail on the head, not aware the General was using a common figurative expression.

Lady Thorold drew back her slippered foot from the top bar of the grate, where she had been comfortably toasting it, wincing slightly, as she answered her husband.

"So he was, my dear. I'm sure I can't understand why he left us without coming to the point. I sometimes think—and I'm always right—that it was Selina's fault he didn't."

Selina laughed. Mr Sterne, cooped up in a corner, hitherto so quiet that they all imagined him stealing a sly nap, laughed too.

"Well, you can laugh, of course," said her Ladyship, looking indignantly at Selina; "but I consider you did Molly a great deal of injury, and I'm sure I can't see why."

"And we can't see how," added Sir George.

"Thank you, General!" called out Miss Thorold, turning her eyes upon the group a moment or two—eyes lighted up with fun. "I await my court-martial."

"Common law," put in Godfrey Sterne. "Let the arraigned hear the charges brought against her."

"Something burning!" exclaimed Sir George, sniffing the air. "Your shoe, I believe, my dear!"

"I thought you were asleep, Godfrey," softly whispered Miss Anstruther, having made her way to his corner, venturing timidly, thanks to the dusk, to put her hand in his.



"What! in this Babel of confused tongues?" he said aloud. "You have no seat, Jane; take this. Oh, never mind me; do me good to stretch my limbs a little." And he adroitly seated her in the corner, and effected his escape a few seconds later, exchanging her society for Selina's.

"Why," explained Lady Thorold, somewhat flustered, talking at her daughter. "You never would let those young people be long alone together."

"That was most proper behaviour on my part," quizzed Selina, "just the very quintessence of duennaship. "What's the good of being thirty if I can't take care of little girls?"

"There's no age so nice as thirty," boomed the deep voice of Mr Denny, he on a distant couch reclining. "Just the bloom of a woman's life."

"I am sure Mr Denny agrees with me," wickedly put Miss Thorold. "Any clear-sighted man of the world must approve the midway course I adopted. Society has its laws, you acknowledge, don't you, Mr Denny?"

"Oh! ah! just so! just so!" replied the curate, his ideas as to her meaning floating in a sea of vagueness.

Lady Thorold's tone rose excitedly.

"I fancy if I had an opportunity of explaining the affair to Mr Denny, Selina, he would not be inclined to consider my views wrong."

"Oh, dear no! certainly not!" anxiously said Mr Denny, desperately striving to catch the thread of their conversation, and uncomfortably conscious he had been entrapped into opposing her Ladyship's argument.

"Mr Denny appears to take both sides," joked Godfrey, looking out of the window. "Well, peacemakers are to be blessed, but I'm afraid this is too dangerous an experiment to copy."

"I want to hear what Selina did," put the General, decidedly.

"Why, my dear, she monopolised his time." Godfrey roared. "She played chess and rode out with him often when I'm convinced he wanted to be with Molly; and, you know, she shouldn't have stood in Molly's chances, poor child! though I suppose she didn't mean it."

"Yes, I did." Mr Denny pricked up his ears. "I'll give you my reasons by and by, mother, if you care to hear them. You forget what a child Molly is, and children don't always know their own minds, nor yet the kind of Darby they d

choose, in riper years, to walk down the hill with."

"Do you know if anything passed between them?" curiously interrogated Lady Thorold.

"I know," replied Selina, tossing to and fro the tassel of the blind, "that neither you nor I, nor any other member of our several acquaintances, would enjoy having their private affairs publicly canvassed. Apart from which, in two or three minutes, if you choose, you can question Molly yourself, for she's briskly advancing down the road. I never study catechisms."

"Only the Comtist catechism," said Godfrey, his eyes bent on the slight girlish figure approaching, against which beat rough gusts of wind. He wondered how she could, in face of it, keep up that swift pace.

"No; of that I know less than you do of the one in your prayer-book," she replied, kissing her hand to Molly.

"How you love that girl!" he said, thinking "Would to God I had been permitted to love her so, to be tender of her, to shield her, my darling, even from that rough wind!"—and turning away, he withdrew to a further chair, placed among the shadows.

Molly looked in a moment ; seeing Miss Thorold, she crossed to her side, and stood encircled by her arm. The child's bright unbound hair, falling to her waist, by reason of its gold colour showed faintly in this dull, broken light ; her face was seen by Selina alone.

"I have been tearing over the cliffs. I scampered like the rabbits themselves, as I frightened them from their cover ; I was so afraid I should be late for dinner."

"Just saved yourself," said the General ; "we've all been waiting for you—thought you'd got drowned—couldn't go up to dress any one of us, till you came in. Too dark for you to be out alone—musn't be in future."

"No, it musn't," echoed Molly ; she stood little in awe of the crusty-tongued baronet now, intuitively feeling that she had edged a way somehow into the narrow heart. "I forgot how suddenly it grows dark ; but I didn't forget"—with a dash of the old merriment in her tones—"that you don't like burnt soup, General."

"Ha ! ha !" he chuckled, very near a laugh ; "that made a lasting impression on you, did it ? There sounds first bugle-call. Did you ever hear a bugle ?"

"No; only a piano-imitation."

"You'll hear it often enough by and by," he said, his voice not one semitone lowered. "Well, soldiering's not so bad—not so bad even to the ladies."

"No, my pet; it's very delightful if you're well off," spoke Lady Thorold, stopping as she passed Molly to administer a gentle tap on the shoulder. "I hope you're not prejudiced against it, dear."

"And I hope you'll none of you be late for dinner," hinted the General, disappearing.

Molly went up-stairs wondering. Did they think she was engaged to Thorold Thorold? Perhaps they knew nothing at all of the boat-scene that had taken place between herself and the young captain of the Rifles on the shingle at Blatchington; and if he had not told them—his nearest relatives and friends—could she do so? Would they not misunderstand her, and think her a vain, conceited girl, who wanted to brag about her offer, or a heartless coquette, making fun of a man who had paid her the highest of honours? or perhaps silly and inconsiderate and ungrateful to Providence for the good fortune that had unexpectedly crossed her

humble path? She did not know what to do, best for her and him. She looked at her face in the glass, meeting the troubled, shadowy eyes therein reflected, and said to herself, "Perhaps if I had looked like this a month ago, the poor old fellow wouldn't have found me worth having. But I'm sure I look like a lady even yet; I think I'm prettier now than Jane. How can Godfrey love her so much more than me!"

She turned wearily, she was tired from her long walk, and the weakness occasioned by that attack of low-fever clung to her limbs yet!

"If I could only forget it!" she said, poor child, brushing the tears from her eyes—they filled so easily; "if I could only forget it, and be just as I was before I knew him!"

But it is not so easy to forget. Molly's face had a washed-out expression all the evening. She pretended to be very interested in a book, and sat close to Miss Thorold, in her favourite low chair, whilst Jane drew out a plan of her coming wedding, sketching the bridesmaids' dresses, and enumerating, for Lady Thorold's edification, the exact number of pocket-handkerchiefs and stockings, and so forth, completing her trousseau. Our little girl's interest in articles

of apparel had died out forlornly since her short illness ; it seemed life held nothing worth caring for, or being curious about now. She was very good, and most careful. Even Miss Thorold could not see how she grieved, and how terribly the young heart had been scarred ; but for all that, Mr Sterne never moved or spoke, more especially to his betrothed, but that every action and word photographed itself on her mind. Still and pale she sat, bending over her book—whether of gay or dull type she knew not—wondering why this evening—Miss Anstruther's last at the Lodge—the gentlemen should so long withhold their society.

“How many cigars they must smoke!” she said to herself, almost petulantly. “I wonder what they talk about when they're all by themselves, and if they find it dull? Ladies are always so dull if there are many of them together. They only talk about dress, or go to sleep.”

“Molly!” said Miss Anstruther, startling her from her reverie. “I beg your pardon—I mean, Miss Bloomfield; but every one else, even Godfrey, calls you Molly when they speak of you, you know, and so I couldn't help it.”

Molly's cheek burned. How could he mention her, and by this dear home-name, to Miss Anstruther, who, he himself had told her, came between him and his love ? he must mock her so.

"I was going to ask you if you'd be one of my bridesmaids ? I've one to fill up yet, and I'll put your name down if you like."

Miss Anstruther bit the point of her pencil, meditating the effect Molly's elegant figure and beautiful hair would produce in the circle of bridesmaids. She was ambitious of having a pretty wedding, even in November.

"No, thank you," said Molly.

"No !" repeated Miss Anstruther, amazed. "Why, you don't know what fun you would have. You would see London ; and besides that, you'd be certainly the prettiest of the six, and all the young men would rave about you. And Thorold's coming up to town from Aldershot too."

"I'm sure that is a nice inducement—eh, dear Molly ?" smiled Lady Thorold, recumbent on the sofa. But Molly held her ground.

"I don't want to go, thank you," she said. She could give no reason, she could force not another syllable. It would be impossible to bear



it, she sighed—impossible to kneel down in the glad marriage-circle with her heart breaking; and it would be so wicked of her to envy another woman her husband.

“But why not?” went on Miss Anstruther, unwilling to lose such an ornament to the ceremony about to be celebrated, a few days hence, in old Hampstead Church. “I will be glad to give you your dress.”

“And so would I, my love. And you might go with us,” pleaded Lady Thorold, anxious to bring the young people—by the young people she signified Molly and her nephew—together again. “Jane’s quite right,” she murmured, glancing at her daughter. “She would look lovely in white and blue.”

“Pink,” corrected Miss Anstruther. “I’ve filled up all the blues. Don’t you think pink would suit her complexion best?”

“It doesn’t matter about the colour,” said Molly, looking up with nervously flushed face; “I can’t go,” and she caught tight hold of Selina’s hand, and leant her burning cheek against it.

“Don’t worry the child,” spoke the good friend, tenderly clasping Molly’s fingers. “She’s a wise little girl; and even had she accepted your offer

Jane, I, as head-nurse, her physician-extraordinary, would have countermanded such a movement."

"You're very odd, Miss Bloomfield," said Jane, with a shrug of her handsome shoulders. "I never knew any one half so odd in all my life. Country people like excitement, as a rule—they get so little of it."

"I'm fond of quiet places," Molly answered; "but I am very grateful to you, Miss Anstruther—it is very kind of you. Perhaps, if I felt well and strong, I should have enjoyed it."

"Some people like to be thought delicate," said Jane. "I could make myself quite as thin as you are, if I walked as much, and ate as little."

"I think it would be an improvement."

Selina uttered her sharp little sentences in the quietest tones, and generally timed them so cleverly that they eluded retort. Jane never excelled in repartee, therefore she invariably met raillery by a warding-off sort of smile or a shrug expressive of contempt. Godfrey Sterne, contrasting the two women, later in the evening, mentally subscribed to the truth of Miss Thorold's hint. His eyes rested momentarily on the bride-elect, not a flattering glance; they wandered to Molly

perpetually; either he could not, or he did not, try to resist the magnetic witchery of her presence. It was a very dull evening, to make the best of it—the only talkative person being Mr Denny, whom cigars and wine had rendered fiercely loquacious. He stationed himself almost in Selina's pocket, and his fiery glance roved from her to Molly, undisguised admiration of them both therein conveyed. He addressed the whole of his conversation to Miss Thorold, which, if intended for public benefit, became so by reason of the loud key in which his utterances were pitched.

"Talk of the devotion of soldiers, Miss Thorold," he said; "the church stands before the army in bravery any day. There's not a member of my congregation who wouldn't jump into a ditch for me to-morrow, if I held up my finger. What do you think of that?"

Miss Thorold laughed; her laugh was round, musical, one of those rare laughs it is refreshing to hear.

"Sir George says the regiment he commanded in India would have laid down their lives for him to a man. Is there anything very extraordinary in that? I tell you it's only what my congregation would do for me."

Cigars and wine had raised Mr Denny to the topmost pinnacle of his own esteem.

"You regard yourself as their superior officer, I suppose?" said Miss Thorold, smoothing Molly's hair, and looking down, smiling, into the blue, wondering eyes.

"Yes; you've hit it exactly. Of course—of course. Commanding officer! Very good term, indeed. The church takes precedence, always, you know, don't you? It's not fashionable in these days; but I mean to hang on to the old boat."

"I should think fashion had nothing to do with it."

"Fashion! why, it's all fashion—all fashion in the church. One day you may grow a beard, and the other, you must shave it off. The Primate doesn't like us to be admired by the ladies. Fashion! why, if it wasn't for my affectionate congregation, I declare I'd throw up my curacy to-morrow, and live in town; but they like me down there. Yes; though I say it myself, I've a sole charge—a—a"——

"Molly, will you sing?" whispered Miss Thorold.

"Sing!" echoed Mr Denny. "Yes, allow me

to lead you to the piano. Can you sing a Bol—  
Bol”——

“I don’t think I can sing at all to-night,” said Molly, her wistful eyes seeking Godfrey Sterne’s dark corner. “I’m sure I shall break down.”

“No; you never break down,” replied the curate; and so perforce Molly was seated on the music-stool, and with trembling fingers she struck a few uncertain chords, and finally wandered into the pathetic simplicity of the lovely little song—

“And ye shall walk in silk attire,”

her whole sorrowful soul intensifying the plaint of the dolorous notes. She sang the first verse as she would have sung it a few weeks back—sweetly and touchingly—no more; but when she reached the cry—

“Oh, who would wear a silken gown  
Wi’ a puir broken heart?  
And what’s to me a silver crown,  
If fra’ my love I part?”

she came suddenly to a stop, and, without a word of apology or excuse, hurried out of the room, and went swiftly up the stairs to her own small sanctum, and sat down on the sofa at the foot of the bed, crushing her hands together,

weeping very bitterly. Poor little Molly! I don't think in her misery she uttered any reproach or wish for death, or thought jealously even of her happy rival; but she said to herself, over and over again, as if it were a prayer going up direct from her heavy heart to God—

“If I could only forget it! If I could only forget it!”

By and by, when the paroxysm passed, she blamed herself hardly for her folly and her weakness, and fancied she had revealed her secret to them all, and the hot colour spread itself over her poor drenched face, and tingled in the points of her fingers. She felt suffocated almost, and went to the window, threw up the sash, and leaned out; and took in a sense of divine quiet and calm, so that her grief sank as did the turbulent passion-white waves, and the strong unrestrainable, untameable power we call wind, at the majestically mild rebuke, “Peace, be still,” breathed from holy lips to the tempest-black waters of Gennesareth. She was looking with sad eyes at the star-flecked sky, trying to shape the body of the Great Bear, when an arm encircled her, drawing her away from astronomical speculation, and a firm hand put ten-

derly from her brow the wind-knotted waving hair.

"Why, dear child, what are you doing?"

"I wanted air," said Molly, shivering.

"Air! Perverse, wilful, thoughtless being! you mean you will have draughts and cold night breezes! I imagined you sensibly tucked up in bed. I find you, mad as Cassandra, raving at the moon, wooing back the fever that was so unwilling to part with you. Molly, I'm ashamed of you. I thought you had a better supply of that excellent treasure, common sense, locked up in your nature's depths, to call upon in time of need. Yes, Miss, though you do smile at me with Correggio-like eyes, I repeat it, that I blush for you. You can lay no claim yet to the title of woman. You are a mere child, nothing but a baby. Don't put your head down on my shoulder, Moll. I'll have nothing, not a jot, not a hint of affection from you. I'll order the carriage at ten to-morrow. Back to Blatchington, to your responsible parent and sister, shall you go."

Molly clung to her, clasping her hands together tight round Miss Thorold's neck.

"No, dear! I won't be sent; I can't go home yet. I am not strong enough to bear all the

trouble. It's very selfish, but it makes me so ill, so wretched, to see Papa looking old and thin, and Nanny's dear, anxious face. And I want to talk to you so much."

"Then I order you to bed, refractory subject, rebel that you are. Release me, Molly! do you intend strangling me because I speak the words of wisdom? I do not leave your room until I see you robed in your nightgown—in bed, where, too, I extort a promise you will be pleased to remain."

Molly smiled and obeyed. Slowly, as though loth to comply, but driven perforce to compliance, she unclasped her waistband, put aside her small gold brooch, undid the fastenings of her simple white dress, the while Miss Thorold stood by, affecting sternness, her tone not unlike her father's.

"Give it me." She took possession of the muslin gown as Molly lifted it above her head, and adroitly folded it. "You see I can act maid to perfection. You wear this no more, Miss; the evenings are too cold. If you persist in courting draughts, revelling in extremes of hot and cold—a tropical drawing-room and air-filled passages—then you shall be cased from head to foot in flannel."



"But I have brought no evening-dress except that!" remonstrated Molly, removing the pins that held her curls on the top of her head, and shaking her hair over her bare shoulders. "I can't manage without it."

"Yes, you can; you must, Pet," looking at the wax-moulded figure before her, with its pink-white limbs and sweet childish face, Miss Thorold allowed her temporary sternness to shrivel back into its natural pigmean limits. "To-morrow you will have no one to dress for; you may wrap yourself in your dressing-gown. I intend to don such a toga myself. Every one, saving you and your dragon 'grete and grimme,' goes up to town by the midday train from Seaford."

"Every one?"

"Every one, including Mother and Father. There, sit down, child; let me pull off your shoes and stockings. You know, in a few days my cousin's marriage comes off. Mother has to find a new bonnet, and she's harder to please than a girl of sixteen, by far. The General's longing to get a peep at the interior of his Club. Jane's longing to review her trousseau, and to make sure her aunt's arrangements for the

breakfast are quite *comme-il-faut*. Godfrey's agreement to the settlement necessarily calls for his presence."

"And you?" breathed Molly. She shed no tears. This broad matter-of-fact statement forbade a scene; besides, she superstitiously accredited her tears weakly wicked, and was trying with all her strength to be brave and patient, until the time should come when she could mercifully "forget."

"I shall follow the day previous, and return when it's over, dear, to take care of my wild uncaged bird."

Miss Thorold, in completing the short sentence, spoken with an indescribable depth of tenderness and sympathy and compassion, kissed the little rosy-tipped foot she had just divested of its covering, and lifted the snow-draped figure into her arms.

"God bless you! God help you, my pretty one! and keep you in His grace and give you peace. Good night!"

Her mouth met Molly's; the quivering lips clung to hers passionately. Lying back upon her pillow, Molly returned the "Good night," folding her hands meekly outside the coverlid.

Then Miss Thorold blew out the light, and stepped softly into the passage, closing the door behind her, shutting in the little being she loved, alone with her sacred sorrow,—alone to wakeful, long night hours, tossing restlessly in the woe that can only be healed by time, and nothing else in all the world. Molly Bloomfield lay battling with her dreary love,—love that might have been so beautiful and bright, but was so hard to bear, so unconquerable, standing before her soul, between her and peace, like a demon of horror ; no light in her room, no light any more in her life ! Pardon her ! she was so young, the idea was not unnatural. Hundreds of girls smarting under a like pain, writhing in the crushing agony of disappointment, the cruellest of sorrows, have held like thoughts, strong almost as conviction, that their star had set for ever and ever ; that existence was a blank colourless old-maidism until the end, a long path to tread with weary feet, devoid of sun, of all beauty, above which hung nothing but invariable density of blackness ; and hundreds have awakened from their dream, have shut romance within a wedding-ring, have hushed babies to their breasts ; only one or two women from among the mass, perhaps, have

kept to the first love's memory, banishing the after-suitors that rose to replace him.

Molly looked very pale the next morning when she stepped into the breakfast-room, yet, as chance would have it, never prettier; the dignity of secret trouble had crept up into her eyes, and lurked about her mouth; and all the witchery that of old had clung to her radiant smile and bubbling laughter, to her gay step, to her graceful restlessness, to her wild impulsive merry words and gestures, seemed condensed now into the quiet of soft, sweet womanliness. She had risen betimes: there was only one member of the Lodge household to greet her as she entered, and he, Godfrey Sterne, advanced with extended hand. Somehow, his manner towards her had changed; he was so deferential, so frigidly polite, so choice of words; he treated her like an old lady almost, and yet when he addressed himself to her, bitterness died out of his voice, and sarcasm fled his tongue; and she knew it, saw it, felt it with a hunger of wonderment as to the why and wherefore—not understanding the changelay with herself—that her very gentleness, and her unshaken sweetness, forbade the exchange of old converse between them now.

"I am glad to find you alone, Mr Sterne," she said, and a moment left her hand in his, "for I wanted an opportunity to offer you my congratulations. I hear you are to be married in a few days, and I hope you will be happy—very happy."

Molly's voice fell to a low tone, her eyelids drooped, pale pink tinged the tearworn cheek. He dropped her hand as though it were something that had power to sting or burn.

"Thank you! How remarkably considerate! I admire your good taste in reserving your congratulations to the last. Don't you think, Miss Bloomfield, you might have rendered taste superlative in degree by withholding them altogether?"

He was profoundly agitated; his eyes blazed, a tremor of pain ran through his quickly spoken words; he stood opposite, searching her face.

She looked up, amazed. "I ought to have said it long ago," she faltered, "but I did not dare. Forgive me!"

"You dare on my last day, however. I respected your silence; my regard for you was intensified by it. How can you perjure your lips with a taunt?"

"I do not understand you," sighed Molly, leaning against the edge of the sideboard, feeling weak even to faintness. Then she put out her hand again. "Oh, don't let us part like this. I cannot bear it. Won't you take my wishes for your happiness? I speak them from my very heart."

Molly's eyes were almost too tired for fresh tears, but their glance was pathetically sorrowful.

He fetched her a chair, and made her sit down, and once again their fingers met in a close clasp; once again he was by her side, looking down into the dearly-loved childish face, a frenzy of passion working in his own. Not again, however, did he forfeit his self-respect.

"No, Molly; offer me no congratulations. I am not marrying for love. Your wishes rouse the very devil in me. I have only loved once in my life; I shall never love again. Have I fallen to the dregs of your estimate of me, dear? Do you look upon me as a beast, a fortune-hunter, peradventure too low for your remembrance even?"

Molly stooped her head, her lips touched his hand once. "I'm so, so sorry; but you will always be the same to me." Then she drew back her

own hand, in which the healthy brown tint was fast melting into delicate white, and folded her fingers in her lap. The quiet voice, the tender womanly confession of pure attachment, restored his self-possession.

He moved to an opposite seat. By and by he said, hesitating slightly, "When, Miss Bloomfield, will the world be permitted to congratulate you?"

"I don't know. I cannot read my future," said Molly.

"Nay; you know to whom I refer."

She shook her head.

"Perhaps you consider it impertinence on my part. You do not wish it talked about—you are shy of criticism. I have never met any lady who kept her secret with such perfect calm. Your self-possession, Miss Bloomfield, strikes me as curious. You manage even your correspondence with a diplomatic secrecy that is quite remarkable."

"My correspondence is so small. I only write to papa and Nanny," Molly said, failing to catch the thread of his satirical observations.

"Do you mean to tell me you never write to Thorold?"

"To Captain Thorold! I?"

"Yes, to Captain Thorold. Speak, Miss Bloomfield, for God's sake!"

She trembled violently; she met his impatient glance.

"Never! I have never written to him. Yes," she corrected herself instantly, "I did once; but that was a mistake."

He stood, he spoke hoarsely, his words, as it were, melted one into the other.

"The truth is, you will be Thorold's wife!"

"I?"

"Yes; you." He stamped his foot upon the ground before her. "No equivocation, no falsehood. You are engaged to him? Do you hear? Molly, don't look like that. You are engaged to Thorold Thorold?"

White to her very lips, the poor child said distinctly, "No!" and then a silence, such as reigns in a chamber of death, came between them—a silence, long and dreadful. Passion, conscience, honour, gloomed themselves in one horrible shadow before Godfrey Sterne's vision;—all he had lost, all he had sacrificed, all he had forfeited for ever—that to which he was bound, revealed itself in the moment;—a spirit dread as that seen



in the darkness of night by Job, a ghost of slain happiness rising as the spectral form of Banquo at the wedding-feast.

And Molly hid her face, the throbbing of her heart surging violently in her ears.

“What is it makes their eyes afraid  
To know what each is thinking of?”

Steps sounded overhead ; the General's door opened, slammed to, his boot creaked on the stair, he was coming down to breakfast. A moment only was left them. He took her hands gently from her face, and stooped and kissed her once, and then was gone—gone, her star of the morning, her ideal god of the north, her one love—and she, for very pride, and for her dear womanly dignity, must wear her great grief hidden evermore.

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Breakfast was a scramble that morning, over quickly. Mr. Denny, who made one of the party going up to town, looked sentimentally at Selina's imperturbable face over his plate, and sighed each time he raised his cup of coffee to his lips, venturing, however, but few remarks, possibly from a double reason—the necessity of eating fast, and the consciousness of having said a little

too much the evening before. The meal at an end, the travelling ladies hurried to worry their respective maids with endless small questions and directions ; and Selina poured out a fresh cup of coffee, and buttered a slice of toast.

"For Godfrey," she said, glancing at Molly ; "he's packing, he says, and of course forgets we've had breakfast. Packing ! I wish you could see him, Molly—throwing all his shirts and socks into his portmanteau in a heap, and cramming brushes and ties, and no one knows what else, into the corners. Men are such idiots in small matters," she added, marching off with her coffee and toast. "Hadn't you better go into the drawing-room, dear, out of the way of this united confusion, if confusion can be unity in any sense ?"

Molly did as she was bid, went into the drawing-room, and sat down by the fire. It seemed all like a strange sad dream ; but she cherished one little bit of consolation,—no one remarked that she looked other than her natural self, no one had inquired the reason of her hasty exit after her incomplete song of the night before. No ; they were all too busy to mind her ; that was a comfort. Horror came near her in the shape of Mr Denny ; he stopped upon the thres-

hold, peeping rather than looking in, but further than the threshold he did not advance. Apparently, he had forgotten something, for he appeared to be plunged momentarily into deep thought, knitted his brows, ejaculated "Ah!" in a ponderous voice, and disappeared. Molly sprang up and shut the door, too agitated and sick at heart to care whether or not Mr Denny was aware of her rudeness, and retraced her steps to her chair, where she sat, undisturbed and sad enough, poor child, until the carriage rumbled along the drive. Then she stood up, and her eyes were brilliant with excitement; the time for saying good-bye had come at last. Bolton brought in wine and cakes on the salver, and the next moment—how, she scarcely knew in her dizziness—they were all in the room, breaking off little bits of biscuit, swallowing sherry, speculating on the weather, what the glass said, how the time went, and so forth, whilst Molly, faint and pale, watched them with her big, misty eyes. Then her gentle Ladyship broke into her reverie.

"Will you help me on with my travelling cloak, Molly? Oh, dear! you've put the hood inside. That's right; thank you, my love. Selina, you'll

take care of her; she looks delicate. What shall I say to Thorold for you, my pet?"

"Nothing," spoke Molly, her irritation beyond her control.

"Nothing! you cruel little thing! Well, I know young people don't like having their messages delivered by old ones. Good-bye, sweet! I shall bring him back with me if I can induce him to come. I don't think it will be difficult to find an inducement as long as we can keep you at the Lodge, Molly. You promised to dust my china for me, remember, my pet; so I can't possibly let you go until I return."

Lady Thorold patted the burning cheek with her velvet-like fingers, brushed her lips affectionately to the poor little aching forehead, and followed her daughter to the carriage. Then passed the General and Miss Anstruther.

"Well, my dear, I hope you'll come up and ride the old mare in the Row—happy to see you any day," and the old soldier grasped warmly the thin fingers of "our little girl," as he termed her.

"Adieu!" said Jane, limply extending her gloved hand. "Sorry you won't be one of my bridesmaids; but you'll hear all about it from

Selina, of course. I left a bottle of Eau-de-Cologne for you in my room,"—and she swept out, not reading in Molly's scornful smile a refusal of her gift. Then the last—Mr Denny, in his anxiety to be near Selina, had forgotten her altogether—Godfrey Sterne approached. She stole one look at his face, only one ; she could not fathom it ; it was very white and cold. Self-possession deserts us in such moments very often, and Molly was near giving way.

"Good-bye," she said, in her misery folding her fingers tight.

In his sensitiveness he read the action to mean—"Touch me not—your life, your devotion, belong not to me ;" and he gave, in quiet tones, simply a responsive "Good-bye," no more, and followed. Rigid, Molly stood so, until the carriage-wheels died away over the grating stones, and her friend came back into the room, a bright smile like rare autumn sunshine on her lip.

"Now, dear, I have you all to myself ;" but at sight of that white face, from which every particle of colour had receded, she stopped, alarmed.

Molly took a step forward ; the next minute Miss Thorold held her in her strong, loving arms.

"Oh! dear," she sobbed, "my heart is breaking. I loved him so!"

"Hush, hush, my darling! I myself know what lost love means," whispered Selina.

## CHAPTER IX.

### A WINTER EVENING.

“FOR winter came, the wind was his whip,  
One choppy finger was on his lip ;  
He had torn the cataracts from the hills,  
And they clanked at his girdle like manacles,”

sang Anne, entering the parlour, a red such as crimsons the Robin's breast on her cheeks, and flakes of snow flecking her mantle and dress.

“Have you been wanting your tea, Dadds ?”

“I wanted you, my daughter,” replied Mr Bloomfield.

“Anne, I wish you always had that brilliant colour—it becomes you. It is delightful to look at you.”

“I feel wild to-night,” cried Anne, tossing her hat and cloak aside ; “I have caught the vigour of the air, of the wind. The snow is thick upon the ground, ankle-deep. King Frost is abroad, Dadds ; you can see the glitter of his dazzling garments everywhere ; he is crowned with stars—he is glorious.”

"Talking of garments, Miss, are your own not wet?" smiled the master.

"No;" Anne's elfish brightness shone out in answering smile; "but I have been tramping literally in snow; my boots are drenched through and through."

"Oh, thoughtless puss! where have you been so long?"

"Been! All round Blatchington, all over Seaford; across downs, along white roads. There! you look curious. I am delighted. Don't try to abrogate your weakness. Curiosity's just as inherent in your nature as in mine."

She clapped her hands merrily.

"How your tongue rattles on apace! Well, well, well! I'll confess to folly. Where have you been, Nanny?"

"I told you where," she said, hovering in the doorway. "Now, I am going to rid myself of my stiff boots; then, Dadds, you shall have tea, and all my news. How that apostrophe to winter rings through my head!"

Mr Bloomfield stirred the fire into a ruddy blaze, that the room might be bright for her on her return; the glow is on his homely face. Ah! poor old schoolmaster! that face has changed



within the few months which have elapsed between October and January. It was plain to all who saw him often, the Perkins sisters, and his anxious daughter, that, as he himself had termed it once upon a time, Mr Bloomfield's life had come down to the snuff of the candle. None of his family, he said sometimes, half in joke, half in earnest, had lived very long, and he counted now over threescore years. Anne, with a sinking heart, watched the change; saw it, yet shrank from acknowledging it even to herself. To Molly, absent all these weeks, she could breathe nothing of her terror; she dared not give a form to the shadowing suspicion that grew and grew from day to day so horribly.

Nevertheless, it was true that the old school-master's feet rarely now took him beyond the garden-gate. It was winter, he would say, with his radiant smile; old men cannot always battle cold. But Nanny, sitting opposite him through many quiet evenings, watching him as he dozed over the fire, began to realise the fact that a great trouble was creeping in upon them. Oh, what were life without him! The dear, old, foolish father, who was no hero to her or any one, who was simply the improvident, weak, generous,

tender-hearted schoolmaster of the place, fond of the little ones in the town, liked by all, disliked by none! What should they do without him, she and Molly?—she especially, whose whole strong affection was bound up in three loves, no others—in one of whom she never spake, in the pretty sister leading a gay life in town, and in this old man who was passing to his eternal rest? She thought of that great leathern arm-chair void of his presence; of the footstool, desolate of those large, loosely-slipped feet; of the carefully browned pipe, that he coloured with such infinite pride, lying waiting for the fingers that would touch it never more; of the net hung up in the passage, with which he waylaid in dark hedgerows, in field herbage, the brilliant-winged insects forming the small collection they had known from earliest days as Papa's beetles; of the capacious wideawake, the knotted stick, the Macintosh of age unknown, keeping company with the net upon the line of pegs; of the memories these simple things would vividly repaint when the busy hands and the dear old pate were level with their mother-dust. Anne thought sometimes she could hardly bear it; she must send for Molly home—Molly, who

had even stayed away at Christmas-time, leaving the old Dadds to light his Christmas-pudding for the first time without her impudent wee mouth blowing at the wax-match over his shoulder, her happy laugh to wake an echo from his ready lips, her mischievous fingers to stick bits of holly into his mince-pie. But the old man never called her back, never blamed her for her thoughtless disregard of home ; and Nanny said to herself, with a sigh and faint blush of shame, "Surely, if he can be content with only me, I should be content with only him ;" and never wrote a word of her trouble and heart-sickness and longing to poor Molly, who was far from happy, as we know.

"He should have beef-tea and port wine, my dear," decisively said Miss Perkins ; and the Doctor repeated her words, saying that Mr Bloomfield's system had become generally lowered, and must be raised ; and to raise it, he wrote out a prescription for a tonic, and ordered wine to be given him two or three times a-day. And now you may imagine, if you cannot realise, what this meant to Anne Bloomfield, whose housekeeping stores were very small, and could not be added to. It meant a bill at Mogden

& Son's—a bill that was to be paid. How? They lived on a slender annuity, purchased for Mr Bloomfield by a departed relative, according to the said relative's last will and testament; and this annuity, Anne knew, died with her father. The grocer was not a particularly refined or compassionate man; he had mouths to feed likewise; he had created children, and his children were of more consequence to him than other children's parents. He was quite willing to run credit for "a little time;" but, mind you, his little time was limited by a narrow bound of days, and the day approached when he would "look over his books," and demand the settlement of that "small account," which, if not seen to, quickly did away with the grim tyrant called "Credit" altogether.

Anne acted the part of a brave woman. She determined Mr Bloomfield, if he needed such things, should want for neither port wine nor chicken-broth, nor any other luxury that is necessary to failing health and appetite. She girded herself for work, and her work began with her resolution. She would amass money; others less gifted had done so; she cared not how humble the means, if, rightfully and honourably, she se-

cured her end. See the little creature, in Betty's apron, sweeping out the lumber-room adjoining the kitchen, getting it cleared of boxes and accumulated rubbish; issuing orders with a promptitude and conciseness worthy of Napoleon. See her diving into stores of books long excluded from the light, selecting crusty-looking treatises on history and geography, bending her head for a few moments over a forgotten volume of fairytales. See her face irradiated with intelligence of the highest kind. "Ah, my ugly duckling! like you, let me bear and forbear, till I grow into the old man's beautiful beneficent one!" See her nailing to the walls yellow-rimmed maps, surveying her work, though her hands smart from the weight of the hammer, and her temples ache from stooping, with ineffable satisfaction. Hear her revealing her small plans to the Blatchington pastor in the comfort of the Parsonage-study, indicating her intention to sweep within the circle of her administration all the learning populace of young Seaford, with the determined clearness of a Von Moltke significantly putting his thumb upon the outlined "carte" of Metz and Strasburg to be swept within the limits of the German Empire—until she gets out of the old gentleman

not only an approving smile, and a warm "God bless your efforts, and prosper you, my child," but half-a-dozen wooden benches from the school-house for a loan. See her with brave heart plodding through deep snow, over long distances, heralding her project with bugle-like hope and gaiety, hiding her longing and her anxiety in her breast, across which she bears the shield of noble purpose, through which no raillery, nor scorn, nor flatly-spoken impudence can strike to wound.

Now, divested of her "stiff-boots," whilst the tea draws in the plated teapot, she sits facing the old father, for whom her girl's strength and pride are given up ; and there is gladness in her eyes, backing her tongue, at which he marvels much, catching the infection they convey.

"Now, my little woman, your confession."

"I'm going to become some one of importance," she said. "I shall establish a name, a reputation. I shall be worthy of you, Dadds, dear. Now guess what it is I am going to be?"

He shook his head with mock dolefulness.

"You are going to be—married."

Her countenance fell, a moment only; the pain

contracting her dark eyebrows passed, and left the white forehead clear again.

"Wrong, as of course I knew you would be. Guess once more. Stop! three was the magic number allotted to guessing-work in fairy times. Go on, old Dadds."

"You are going to act chaperone-sister to Molly."

"Nothing of the kind. What! leave you to Betty's care? She'd like it, I know, but I shouldn't. Failing so far, Mr Bloomfield, can you not sling your hammer a little nearer the right nail?"

He thought a minute, then he clapped his hand upon his knee.

"Now I have it! You are going to head the Seaford choir." He had a visionary belief that the Seaford choir rivalled that of Westminster Abbey, albeit into the former house of worship he had not stepped for years.

Nanny lifted the teapot out of the fender, and set it on the tray.

"Signally wrong. I tread in your steps; and you, you must confess, never could hum even 'Rule Britannia' without wandering into something totally foreign to the air. I am going to be a schoolmistress."

“Nonsense, Nanny!”

“Well, then, nonsense. Hi! you’ll not offend me, do you hear, by associating the idea of nonsense to my school. I approve of nonsense as the handmaid to a child’s education. I shall have laughing faces and jolly hearts in my establishment. Maps shall be our big picture-book, and all the rivers and mountains and countries and cities shall be awfully nice stories. Arithmetic shall be our game—yes, you stare, but I mean it; we’ll work great sums in home-made bulls’-eyes; and when the school breaks up, each child shall carry a bit of addition away in its mouth.”

She looked rosy with contemplative happiness, her eyes sparkled.

“Are your children to be neuter genders?” quizzically put Mr Bloomfield.

“No, Mr Tease. I said ‘its’ because I chose to shorten my sentence, and leave out ‘his’ or ‘her.’”

“Amalgamation of sexes, then?” queried the master. He used a bantering tone, but his heart was inexpressibly touched.

“Just so. In the world, men and women mix pretty freely. I’ll have no separation of



the sheep from the goats. In my little world they shall love each other as much as they like."

"They'll be sure to love you, at any rate, Nanny."

"Yes," nodded Anne, wheeling him, chair and all, to the table ; "they shall."

"But where are the pupils, my dear little woman ?"

"Coming to-morrow !" triumphantly rang the low sweet voice.

"To-morrow ! How many ?"

"Two."

"A large school that, dear !"

"Don't laugh ; these are green days. Wait till the plan is ripe, then you shall taste of the result."

"Ah, my precious child ! Come here, Anne. Let me hold you a moment to me, daughter—noble daughter ! I know why you do it, Anne. You can't deceive me as to the real reason."

"Real reason !" Anne said, pulling his little bit of grey hair. "Did I ever offer you a sham one ? I tell you, and you are not to be indulging in morbid scepticism, that I want some energy instilled into my life. O Dadds ! you don't know what it is to be an old maid !"

"No ; true !" His tears melted beneath the sunniness of her eyes.

"An old maid with nothing to do—no hope, no object in her drained-out life. Ah, Daddy, what a prospect !"

"But why shouldn't you marry, dear ? You are young and pretty, and you are talented in a way."

Nanny walked back to the teapöt, so grave now, and quiet, almost to listlessness. You could see the poor child's effort to throw it off again, and be gay for his sake, but how hard it was !

"Such little things touch secret strings  
For heavy hearts to bear."

Young and pretty ! What was that if one were poor, and in debt, and positionless in the world, loving one in a higher sphere, whom to marry was to lower to her level, perhaps ? She was silent. They did not talk very much, as a rule, for Nanny was reserved by nature, and Mr Bloomfield dozed the greater part of the evening. So Betty came in and cleared the table, and Anne drew out her workbasket, whilst the master, his wonder satisfied, basked in the glow of the winter flame, and finally went to sleep.

And the young girl stitched away with heavy heart. Her lot in life was hard and dreary, and she might have given a stray bitter sigh to it, but that was all. She lived very much in a dreamland—in a castle built on hope. Some day, she said, if she tried to do her duty, God would surely turn the fatal balance. Some day hence, who knows, her passionate young lover might claim her, unfettered by cruel chains laid savagely upon her faithful devotion, to be his wife. His wife! It is a lovely term to all women: the sacredness, the beauty of it crept into her aching heart, and gave her peace. Had he not taken it upon his lips—that word, in reference to her, upon those very lips that had covered her face with kisses? And could she remember this, and doubt? Oh, no! Proudly, above all the insulting insinuations of his mother, she cherished the conviction that he thought her pure in heart and motive, that he loved her, that he waited, as he bade her wait, until the selfish stern woman whom he called by the dear name of mother should voluntarily welcome her as daughter. Wait! Yes, conscious of such love, she could wait, content, in a calm patience, through years and years, perhaps until, never

united in this world, they clasped hands in heaven before the milk-white throne, to the which, she believed, ascend the prayers and aspirations of white hearts. Wait! Yes, as long as she believed in him, she could live and die happily though the line of the tropics were between them, the ends of the world parted them.

Mr Bloomfield was roused from slumber by a sharp rap against the door. He opened his eyes to see Anne standing, her work tumbled in her hands, greeting Mr Thorne. Her manner, her drooped lids, her faltering accents, wrote the truth for the first time upon the old man's brain.

"She loves him—my poor child!" Pity, intensified by a stinging sense of shame, smote the chords of his nature; he bowed his head to his visitor. In these sunless, winter days, his conscience had dwelt sharply on that never-to-be-cancelled I O U, that might any day be produced against him by Mrs Thorne, that his delicate daughter was attempting nobly to dissolve. And now he felt, with a tremor of fear amounting to terror, that she had commissioned her son to touch upon the subject of which he had never

breathed a word nor written a line since his poor Lucy died.

"I have entered too unceremoniously, I am afraid," Percy said, standing between the father and daughter. "I must apologise sincerely. You have not drawn down the blind, Miss Bloomfield ; and seeing the room temptingly light and warm, I turned the handle, and found myself in the passage almost before I was aware of my free-and-easy conduct. I went back to announce my presence in due form, but could find neither knocker nor bell."

"The bell is fixed to the garden-gate," said Anne, lifting her eyes to scan his face. "We have none to our door. We do not need it, indeed—our visitors are few." Then she drew a step nearer him. "Ah ! you have been ill—and you never told me—you did not write to me !"

"I have come to tell you so by word of mouth." Ignoring Mr Bloomfield's presence, he turned to her, his deep-set, sad eyes luminous, his cheeks sunken. "You do not guess what I have suffered, Anne. God grant you may never understand it. I seek rest like *Le Juif Errant*." Then aloud, and calmly, "I leave England to-morrow. I have

come to bid you farewell. I shall probably be away for many months."

"Indeed! and where are you going? I suppose to a warmer climate?" questioned Mr Bloomfield. "Allow me to offer you a seat. Anne, my dear, is there any tea to be had?"

"Thank you; no!" Percy Thorne by a gesture forbade Anne's egress. "You are speechless, Miss Bloomfield. You do not ask 'where?' or 'how long?' or 'why?' Have you no curiosity?"

"Curiosity!" echoed Anne, with a mournful ring in her voice, not moving her eyes from his face—"none; but interest, yes; and its proportion you know."

"Frigid!" he exclaimed, his tone falling almost to a whisper; then he turned himself towards Mr Bloomfield—"You'll think I've chosen a dull trip. I go to Copenhagen. I like the place at this time of the year; it's only nine miles or so from Sweden, and the ice can be crossed in a sleigh or on skates; the latter my misfortune prohibits," he added. "It is probable my erratic tendencies may carry me yet further north—to Finland, perhaps. Can you picture me, Anne, drawn by reindeer over glass-like roads? Heworth Dixon has breathed a spirit of desire

in me to make acquaintance with the shores of the White Sea. I shall go to Solovetsch. I shall explore the quaint monastic fraternity he speaks of."

Anne, whom he so frequently addressed by her Christian name, crossed her arms, a sad shadow stealing over her expressive face.

"How long?" she said, looking away into the fire, her lips trembling.

"*Cela dépend*, circumstance rules me," he replied, bitterly, passing his hand with nervous restlessness through his crisp, dark hair. "I may be absent, as I just now stated, for many months; I may return in as few weeks; the term of my exile does not rest with me."

"Anyhow," said Mr Bloomfield, "you are a lucky fellow, Mr Thorne, to be able to go just where the will takes you. It's enviable truly to have the power of doing whatever one likes."

He sighed; his guest smiled, a sharp, hard smile, that spoke of sarcasm and pain.

"Enviably! most enviably!" he repeated, drawing a chair to the fireside, and facing Mr Bloomfield. "But it so happens, sir, that some of us spend our lives in seeking the Unattainable, baiting fortune or happiness with endless struggles

and longings, never getting a jot nearer the illusive will-o'-the-wisp for all our pains. Luck! a fool's term!"

"Well, well!" softly said the old master, beating his spectacle-case against the back of his left hand. "I suppose whatever happens is for the best." And he looked at the two before him with beaming eyes, as if to affirm, "There, there! that settles the matter."

"Whatever is, is right," spoke Percy, still with the hard smile curling his lip, his glance seeking the flames only. "Dishonesty, fraud, murder, adultery, everything good and bad, according to the notions we ascribe to good and evil, meshed together into one great net, whose maker and keeper is God!

"I heard a devil curse  
Over the heath and the furze:  
Mercy would be no more,  
If there were nobody poor;  
And pity no more could be,  
If all were happy as ye.

Mercy, pity, peace,  
Are misery's increase."

In his clear, high voice, the strange wild words whizzed through the stillness of the room; his thin, finely-cut face glowed with repressed excite-



ment, his eyes shone lurid—he passed his hand across his brow.

“You will count me lunatic or heretic, I believe, Mr Bloomfield, but I find I have some chord of sympathy that strikes in unison with Blake’s madness. However, I have wandered far from the object of my visit, which had a purely business purport. It’s scarcely fair to intrude business topics on your pleasant evening quiet, but I have so postponed it to the last moment, that unless I beg your courtesy to-night, I must perforce leave England with the consciousness that I have left a duty unfulfilled. Can you give me a few moments’ attention, Mr Bloomfield?”

“Certainly, certainly—with pleasure,” weakly responded the schoolmaster, glancing with something of fright in his eye at his daughter, who, gathering her work in her hands, moved towards the door.

“You need not go, Nanny,” he said, authoritatively and beseechingly in the same breath; adding, by way of apology to his visitor, “I have no secrets from my girls.”

Anne blushed. How would Percy reconcile this statement with her pitiful confusion and distress on the evening that he had taken the apple

from her hands in the drawing-room of his own house—that evening when anger and anxiety and blissful ignorance had, combined, given her strength and courage sufficient to uphold the old man's honour, and daringly affirm that not one in all the world could breathe a word against the stainless name? She glanced at her lover's worn face.

“Shall I go or stay?” standing the while, irresolute, her hand on the latch.

“Go,” he answered, shortly, his tone half imperative; but in the smile he gave her she read tenderness, consideration, all the fine essence of Percy Thorne's contradictory character; and fearing nothing, she closed the door upon them, stealing off to the red-floored kitchen, sitting down on the mat before the stove, clasping her knees in meditation, whilst Betty, accustomed to her young ladies' eccentricities of movement, let her be, continuing her ironing with stoical countenance, only now and then turning her eyes towards the figure of her silent mistress.

“He is going away, and for months,” thought Anne, exulting. “It is wicked of me, but I glory in the knowledge. She will be so lonely, that cruel woman!—so lonely through dreary winter

months in the gloom of her desolate house!—so lonely, with fog stealing into the rooms through the yellow blinds, and wind tearing bleakly amongst the ghostly poplars in front! Then, in her solitude, in her longing for him, will she ever think of me—of this?” Anne drew from the bosom of her dress, where she carried it always, the one note she possessed in Mrs Thorne’s handwriting, and smoothed it out upon her knee. “Will anything like pity ever touch her heart for all the suffering she has heaped upon me, for her slander of a little girl who never did her harm? I will never destroy her letter—never! I will use it against her yet. One day, when the poor old man is gone, I will show it to her son before her face.”

Then a violent shivering possessed her; she held the paper close to the hot bars; it shrivelled, it was nearly licked by the tongue of red flame—a moment more and the record had perished utterly; but in the nick of time she drew her hand back; refolding it, she fastened it again within her dress. Poor child! she alternated between generous sentiment, recalling the forbearance towards the dear old Dadds—who had been so weak, not to use the harsher term

dishonest—and the longing for truth. How could she ever prove her own forbearance without that short hard note, should the day come—and it might—when Percy's patience and trust broke, when his faith in her purity of motive snapped? Then she wondered what was the nature of her lover's visit here to-night. Had he been sent, perhaps, to remind Mr Bloomfield that payment of that ruinous I O U could no longer be deferred; that the debt incurred nearly eighteen years ago must be positively defrayed? Anne wreathed her fingers tight. She had heard of bailiffs and executions and such like horrors; she pictured vividly the shame and distress attendant upon the seizure of their household gods, guessing not how little these same household gods would give her father's creditor should they be sold even to the rolling-pin suspended from a hook against the whitewashed wall before her tear-dimmed eyes. Her prospective misery was never, on this account, to become actually present. Sitting opposite to Mr Bloomfield, on the other side of the hearth, Percy Thorne took out his pocket-book, extracting a slip of paper bearing the schoolmaster's signature, dated seventeen years back.

"I am sorry," he said, in his grave exquisitely sympathetic voice, "to be obliged to recur, Mr Bloomfield, to a matter the very memory of which must give you pain. But it is urgent. I only obey a request made to me by my mother some few weeks ago. It is with reluctance I refer to the past, believe me."

"My dear sir," spoke Mr Bloomfield, his voice tremulous, "the sense of the heavy obligation which I owe to Mrs Thorne is present with me night and day. I am an old man, sir. I have been very improvident; yes, I acknowledge it. I suppose," mopping his eyes with his blue handkerchief, "I should earlier have told my poor girls all about it, and have sent them into the world to make money as governesses,"—Mr Thorne tried to stop his words, yet he would continue,—"but, sir, I could not bring myself to do it; they are so young, my pretty little women, I could not bear to exile them from their poor but loving home, and let them buffet with the coarse ostentatious world, which is so rough to poor teachers. It is hard Lucy's girls should suffer so for their father's sake; and yet, of course, they must do what I can't. I'm near the foot of the hill; yes—yes—the foot of the

hill! They must try between them to retrieve my honour, for else, God knows, sir, I've no possible means of paying you."

"Sir," said Percy Thorne, his glance and tone arresting, "you mistake me—you are greatly in error. I am not capable of vulgarity such as you attribute to me. I am not here to-night in the character of a bailiff, nor do I come inquisitively to question your means, or the future prospects of your daughters."

"I had hoped," whimpered Mr Bloomfield, "that they might make good marriages, and have paid it off in that way."

Percy Thorne rose, his mien and speech haughty.

"Enough, Mr Bloomfield; we do not understand each other. Were it my mother's wish to threaten you, to extort the legal value of this bond, she must have employed her solicitor, not her son. Sir, the Thornes have not Shylock blood in their veins. In touching gently on the past, I reverted mainly to the memory of your dead wife, to the trouble that necessitated her seeking monetary assistance—to no transaction itself whatsoever. You will oblige me by identifying this form?"

Mr Bloomfield took the I O U into his

hands. It bridged the chasm of years; it brought back the sweet days of love, of hope dominant above misfortune; it drew again in outline on the canvas of the brain the picture of the heart-crushed young wife gathering her new-born baby to her breast, shutting her dear eyes, with that last mother's look, for ever. He glanced down upon the paper through a cloud of unchecked tears.

"You know it?" said Mr Thorne.

"Know it! ah, yes! ah, yes!" It came like a message from the dead, like a breath from the spirit-world. He bowed his affirmation.

"That is all! I need trouble you with no further questions. You understand," added Percy, receiving into his possession the time-faded paper, his deep-set kindling eye meeting the old master's, "that I am acting purely and entirely in strict accordance with my mother's wishes and commands?"

"Yes," acknowledged Mr Bloomfield.

"Briefly, then, I must tell you, that my mother considers this as a debt incurred, not by you, but by your wife. It was not to you—stranger to her, indifferent to her—that she

lent this three hundred pounds; it was to her friend Miss Berkely."

"Poor Lucy!" sighed Mr Bloomfield.

"Your wife being dead, she accounts the deed void. She never lent you money, Mr Bloomfield; she has no claim upon you, she will never come to you for payment;" saying which, he tore the deed in half, and flung the pieces into the fire, and the blackened ashes soared above the flame that had consumed them.

It was gone!—the incubus of years—the testimony of haunting shame—the sad heritage, he had thought of late, with remorse and pain intense, that was all he could leave his motherless children when the end came! Rising, emotion-struck, profoundly agitated, Mr Bloomfield essayed to speak, but words failed him, his utterance was choked. Gratitude his friend repudiated, scorned. As if he had merely entered here to take an ordinary leave, Mr Thorne drew out his watch, whistled it was late, shook hands with assumed indifference, uttered a few commonplace words expressing a hope he would find Mr Bloomfield looking better on his return from the North, desired his farewells



to Anne, and abruptly quitted the schoolmaster's roof.

Mrs Thorne's head began to nod over the book she held, open, on her lap. "Sleep, gentle sleep," was insidiously stealing away her consciousness of the outer world's realities. She was about to yield herself wholly and entirely to the arms of Morpheus, when the clang of the bell sounding through the still house aroused her, and cheated the lazy god of his victim. She did not quite like the expression on her son's face, as he stood looking at her with gleaming eyes and frowning brow, standing within a few paces of her chair, his elbow resting on the mantle-shelf.

"You will take wine—something to eat, I hope, my son?" she said, closing the open volume, settling her cap, and rising with the intention of ministering to his wants. She did not move beyond the border of the hearth-rug—a grasp strong as iron held her hands in a vice.

"What is the matter, Percy?" she said, sharply. "Let me go, my son. What! you keep me by force?" struggling to free herself, immediately recognising that her fingers were by no

means gently retained. "I am afraid of you—your eyes glare like a madman's. Let me go—you are hurting me."

"Hurt you! you are made of adamant."

"Percy, you are strangely excited; you have been drinking."

"A low charge! There is nothing too low for lips that can slander."

"O my God! is the boy in his right senses? Do you forget that I am your mother?"

"I wish I could forget it, Mother! Your lips pollute the holy epithet."

"Percy, I shall ring the bell. I shall order Bennet to watch you, that you do yourself no harm. Your words border on delirium."

"Ring, by all means—when I so permit. At present I have something to say to you. Calm yourself. I am not addicted to scenes of histrionic effect. Till now, I was not aware of your liking that way. I have executed your commands concerning the paper you entrusted to my care. I have no thanks to transmit to you for your generosity. I waited for none."

"Ah, I see! They poisoned your mind against me. They have robbed me of the only thing I guarded jealously in the world—my son's respect."

"That you had lost before this night," he said, with a bitter smile.

"I am the most miserable woman alive! Percy, you break my heart!"

"Your misery is your own creation. For myself, I abhor feigned sentiment."

"Coward that you are! why not, like a man, tell me wherefore you abuse me, with what you charge me? Say outright you mock me, scorn me, hate me. I comprehend the systematic torture to which you subject me."

"Do you? That saves me time—explanation. If you wish me to utter aloud the scorn that possesses my whole being in your presence, I have courage to express it. I despise you!"

Every bow of ribbon on her cap shook with her trembling; her tongue found no words.

"Of slander, of falsehood, of deception, of tyranny, you are guilty—you know it. A nice little list!"

"That girl has betrayed me! She has shown you the letter. My son, my dear son, forgive me!"

He flung her hands loose and laughed.

"Do you think I am to be so completely fooled? Nay, Mother, you are not quite an

adept in the art of villany yet. Listen ! You found that Anne Bloomfield loved me genuinely, disinterestedly. You watched her like a cat ; you wormed the secret out of her with your ferret's eyes and your treacherous tongue ; then you kindly showed me the snare awaiting my feet, told me the girl had given you reason to suppose that she expected me to marry her ; told me, when I returned from town, and she had flown, insulted, doubtless, that she felt only a little pity for me, smiling at the idea of my daring to seek a wife. You influenced her otherwise. Oh, you are clever ! You hinted, if I sought her in marriage, I should be actuated by merely honourable motives, loving her not one whit ; further, you traded on her gratitude, poor child, revealing dimly the obligation to you under which her father laboured ; finally, you strengthened the knot by writing her a cunningly-framed letter, and by commissioning me to cancel a bond—an act which binds her doubly to the promise you have, by some means, wrung from her,—the promise that she will never cross your wishes by marrying your son.”

Mrs Thorne sat down in the chair from which she had just now risen ; her cheeks were crimson.

"What of that?" she said, with a low laugh. "The very fact of the girl's dishonesty in showing you the letter is an effectual barrier to the possibility of my desiring such a wife for my son."

"*Your* desire!" he beat a sheet of folded note-paper against the back of his hand. "Could I gain Anne's consent, do you think your fiercest anathemas would hinder my drawing my little wife to my breast for ever? Could you have hindered it or helped it had I decked some unfortunate Parisian's doubtful beauty with bijouterie from the Palais Royal, though she flamed *your* money on her neck and arms? Could you, in your ignorance, have helped or hindered it had I driven a golden-haired mistress, like many of your friends, Madam, in the Park, the lady in all probability seated in your own carriage? You saw something of this phase of love in your wifehood. Was it your face, or one younger and lovelier, that leaned most frequently from Mr Thorne's box at Covent Garden? Was it in your arms, or in those rounder and whiter, that my father died? I bear his name. Would you that I bear his character, follow in his steps?"

"Percy," cried his mother, "is it to offer me insult you recall past shame?"

"By no means," he said, quietly and sorrowfully; "it is simply to sketch the *may be* in contrast with the *might have been*, looking forward some few years, that I speak of the past at all. Think it over; picture this sunless house, when you sit here alone, as your word could have made it—gay with fresh laughter, perhaps with the voices of children; a little form flitting like rays of light through these dull rooms, ministering to your necessities, calling you Grandmamma; your son at your side; affection and gaiety the gases of the atmosphere you would socially breathe. Bah! You will read and mope—you will not think and weigh. I shall be distant, living on my slender means—not a *sou* will I touch of yours—scraping money by scribbling penny-a-liners of odd out-of-the-way places for small magazines. Here, Madam"—he came back to the actual present in his abrupt swooping way,—“is the proof of Anne's *dishonesty*. When again you use your pen for such purposes, leave not tell-tale copies of your inditements in your *escritoire*. I had occasion to write a letter myself. I chose, as I often have done, to make use of your desk. In

future, put not your secrets in your blotting-book!"

He tossed the sheet he held into her lap, shrugged his shoulders with contempt, turned on his heel, and quitted the room, leaving Madam alone with her indignant self-upbraiding. "How could she have been such an ass?" Mrs Thorne never minced words. "Such a fool!" For he had kept for days in his possession the rough copy of her letter to Anne.

## CHAPTER X.

### THE HAPPY PAIR.

Two ladies are strolling leisurely along the Champs Elysées, the bright May sun splintering itself against the superb Arc de Triomph, glittering with rainbow tints in the spray of the magnificent fountains playing in the Place de la Concorde, catching the top of the tall obelisk, and obtruding itself somewhat uncomfortably upon the younger lady's eyes.

"Really, dear," says the senior pedestrian, "I'm almost ashamed to walk with you. You look only half-respectable. Just see how that Zouave yonder is staring at you. I'm sure he thinks you're painted, and you've a curl upon your brow quite *à la Menken*, though, thank Heaven, you don't know anything about La Menken, or La-anybody-else that this naughty Parisian world raves about."

"I don't mind the dear old Zouave," says Molly, blushing red, and trying, with a neatly-



gloved little hand, to smooth the wicked curl, pushing it violently under the border of her bewitching spring bonnet ; “but I hate that conceited prig who has been criticising us through his eye-glass ever so long.”

“Us!” laughs Miss Thorold. “Where is your critical friend, Molly?”

Molly indicates a short, portly man of ripe years, well-dressed—albeit he wears excruciatingly tight trousers, and one of those hats not to be equalled out of Paris, that look as if their brims were curled by a hairdresser—well-preserved, a man with a chest and patent-leather boots, a cigar in his mouth, and a tiny hothouse flower in his button-hole.

Miss Thorold followed the glance of Molly’s eye, and lowered her voice. “Bother! How narrow the world is, Molly! The same people start up like Jack-in-the-boxes everywhere. I have the misfortune to know your admirer. He has recognised me. Now we’re martyred for the rest of the day ; so mind you attend to your P.’s and Q.’s, my dear, for I’m in duty bound to introduce him, and he is a man who takes more than an ell if you give him an— Ah! how do you do, Monsieur Legros?”

The fat man advanced, lifting his curled hat from his curled head ; and Molly immediately became absorbed in the stream of carriages, private and *remise*, passing and repassing in the Avenue, aggravatingly holding her pink-lined parasol between her face and the Frenchman's, voting him an intolerable nuisance, and wondering how long he meant to detain them.

Legros spoke English with a foreign roll of the *r*, and a certain avoidance of the *w*, otherwise sufficiently well ; and the sound of the comfortable bass accentuation of the dear mother tongue induced Molly to alter the position of the pink screen she had inserted between herself and her horror, and to meet with the frank stare of her large round eyes his admiring glances.

"Permit me to introduce you," said Miss Thorold. "Monsieur Legros—a young English friend of mine, Miss Bloomfield."

"It shows itself easily that Mademoiselle is English," spoke the stranger, having again removed his hat, standing with the end of a cigar delicately poised between his forefinger and thumb, accompanying his words with a little bow. "We do not find that colour of the hair amongst our ladies. Indeed, to speak you the

truth, it was the hair of Mademoiselle that directed my looks this way in the first instance."

"Really!" interrogatively returned Miss Thorold. "You flatter English ladies, Monsieur. I remember your habit of old, and the difficulty I had in fencing you with your own weapons; they didn't suit my hard hands, such delicate foils as you use. Molly, you will corroborate my words. Have we not seen yellow hair on the Boulevards?"

"Not English yellow, I think," answered Molly, English to her heart's core, and willing to maintain the supremacy of her countrywomen.

"You have reason, Mademoiselle," smiled Legros, showing his white teeth. "No! this is *jaune des jaunes*, which can be had at all the chemists for a trifle, for a mere song, as you express it." Then perceiving that his fixed gaze annoyed her, he turned again to his friend or acquaintance, though in his parlance, every one, even to his most inveterate enemy, that enemy probably his tailor, was "mon ami," or "mon cher ami," the adjective being applied in proportion to the pecuniary difficulties under which he laboured. He inquired the date of her arrival, and the intended prolongation of her stay.

"It will be short, I fear," said Miss Thorold. "We are only remaining a few weeks, and we came solely to benefit my friend's health. Miss Bloomfield is not strong, and change is good for delicate people, I think."

"I honour your sensibility, Madame." Legros threw away his cigar as he spoke. "You display remarkable intelligence in coming at this season. Who knows," lowering his voice, "what Paris may be one year in advance? God! we Parisians may be swept off the face of the earth. Our buildings may be razed; that would break the great heart of Hausse-mann."

"Is war certain, then?" asked Selina.

Legros shrugged his shoulders.

"What is it, this Napoleon? Hold! it is a man of impulse, it is a man of whims, it is a man who stands on the edge of a precipice. If he will wear a crown, he must fight. And success means,"—he pointed his fat finger to the sky. "If he gets beaten by the Germans,"—the shoulders went up again to his ears, but the sentence was left incomplete.

"Why, I thought you all adored him!" ejaculated Miss Thorold.

"For the moment—for the moment ! but I—never !"

Legros elevated his eyebrows in sign of magnificent contempt for the ruler of his country.

"The second of December ! I remember myself of it ! The gamins shout à *Berlin*. I am man of judgment. I keep silence—I say to myself, Not so fast ; if war declares itself, you, Léon Legros, just draw on your banker and weep for your unhappy country in England. The British lion will not hurt you, my friend ; the British lion is made of sugar, he will furnish you with *eau sucrée*, and you will eat the rost-bif of peace and the blum-pudding of contentment."

"Keep clear of your sugar-lion's paw, that's all," said Miss Thorold, a gleam in her dark eyes, for, as she affirmed, abuse of her country was a privilege she reserved to herself. "That's a lovely bouquet you have in your coat, Monsieur."

"You find it so ? It is from the Madeleine. You like flowers ? At what hotel do you live ?"

"At the Louvre—we always go to the Louvre. We shall be happy to see you there, Monsieur Legros. I am afraid to stand longer—the wind is too keen for my friend. I want to take her to

the *Français* to-night, and if she gets cold she will be deprived of a pleasure."

"Ah! the *Français*—very good theatre," said Legros, looking at Molly, who showed to advantage to-day, a colour in her cheeks, sunlight enriching the gold in her hair, standing tall and slender. "They play 'Tartuffe' to-night. Very good troupe—very fine spectacle always."

"I shall not understand a word of it, I know," laughed Molly; "I cannot speak French."

"It will be an excellent lesson, dear," remarked Miss Thorold, drawing her shawl about her, and bowing a farewell salute to Legros.

"Yes," echoed the stranger, "that will be for you a great improvement, Mademoiselle. Au plaisir de vous revoir," and he left them free of his presence, and they saw him waylaying a carriage in which sat several elegantly-dressed women of fashion, to whose good graces they gladly committed him.

So you see, Selina Thorold, in her discovery of poor Molly's secret—a secret of which the tiny household of the tiny house on Blatchington Hill knew nothing—had acted like a kind friend and a sensible woman, and had brought her fading flower, whom the novelties of London failed to

amuse or restore to bonnie health, across the Channel to the brilliant, beautiful, sparkling life of Paris, and was spending money with a lavish hand to bring back real roses to the dear sad face that had grown so pinched and white, albeit it was more lovely to look upon even than of old. She was very proud of Molly, who, in her innocent girlhood, was ignorant of the admiring eyes that followed her graceful movements when she entered the dining-saloon to take her place at the *table-d'hôte*, or of the appellation "La Belle Anglaise," that had been given her by frequenters of the Champs Elysées and the Bois whose glances she arrested by reason of her faultless carriage and the exquisite wealth of curls that shone like burnished gold. To-night, in the stalls of the *Français*, Selina proudly notes the lorgnettes turned down from the tiers of boxes to this fair-haired young creature, whom she guarded with such loving jealousy. Molly, attired *à l'Anglais*, minus hat or bonnet, in a high white dress, was as yet too little accustomed to the fascination of the drama to remove her eyes from the stage. During the enactment of a scene those great orbs of hers dilated with wonder ; it was all real to her ; passion and jealousy, villainy and

virtue, it probed her to the heart, and sympathy or anger or indignation painted itself by turns in her face.

"See, dear," spoke Selina, touching her arm when the curtain fell after the small vaudeville played as prelude to "Tartuffe,"—"there are faces you know in that large box on the second tier."

Molly, beating time with her programme upon the palm of her hand to the measure of the sparkling airs selected from Offenbach, delighting her, from the fiddles in the orchestra lifted her heavily-fringed eyes, and met the steadfast gaze of Godfrey Sterne. He bowed coldly, she bent her head in answering recognition, and looked no more at anything save the drop-scene, or at any one but a sturdy trombone player in front, who blew his instrument excitedly, returning her dreamy stare by one of rapturous homage to her beauty. Miss Thorold understood her pet's temperament; such an unexpected rencontre might possibly shadow her enjoyment a little, but it would no longer cause her heartache, and Molly would never have forgiven her had she let the evening slip by without affording her that glance, that prim stiff bow. No; Mr Sterne was married, and Molly, by look



or thought or word, would sanction or permit not the faintest shadow of disloyalty to his wife. His wife! Poor child! a chill crept to her heart, tightening her breath a moment, as she vaguely remembered that but for the miserable misunderstanding concerning herself and Thorold, she might have been his wife, seated by his side in that box above, his ring on her finger; for he had loved her, she knew. Then her pale lips wreathed themselves into a little smile of scorn, partly for herself, that she should dare to think even of this "might have been;" partly for him, that he lowered himself to the level of a fortune-hunter. "For we should have been so poor! We could not have travelled about in Germany and Italy, and have come to French theatres," she mused, whilst recalling the gorgeous figure of the actual Mrs Sterne, blazing with jewels, leaning her round white arms, shrouded in soft lace, upon the velvet-covered framework of the box.

"Why! can it be? yes, it is Legros," said Selina, in a low voice. People were chatting in the stalls around them, likewise exchanging remarks in half-audible tones, the French jargon, as Molly called it, floating on the air in one confused murmur.

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"Where?" inquired Molly, removing her eyes from the trombone-player, somewhat amused to hear their acquaintance of the afternoon had turned up again so quickly,—“where is the fat, funny fellow?”

“In the Sterne’s box, his face eclipsed by Jane’s opera-glass. He is staring at your hair again, Molly. I think, dear, we’ll have to cut it off, it seems altogether too *attrayant*.”

“Yes, do,” Molly said, biting the edge of her programme. “I’ll plait it tight to my head to-morrow, then he’ll have no excuse.”

“And you won’t spare him a nod—not a glance of your eyes? Do, dear; you can look so haughty when you please.”

“‘There was an old man in a tree,  
Who was horribly bored by a bee,’”

quoted Molly, defiantly. “If he bores me, I’m not going to thank him for it by a bow, Selina.” You see she had dropped the formal Miss Thorold. “Is that the ‘Grande Duchesse’ they are playing now?”

“I can’t say, dear; but I know Legros could tell you; he has Offenbach at his fingers’ end.”

A gentleman standing very near, himself the

proprietor of a stall adjoining Miss Thorold's, bowed across her at Molly.

"Non, Mademoiselle, c'est 'La Princesse de Trebizonde' qu'on joue à ce moment-ci," and he bowed himself back into his niche, just at the final clash of violins and trombone and drum, as the curtain rose upon the first scene in "Tartuffe."

In the box which Molly had studiously avoided, interest in the genius of Molière was pale. They had all seen "Tartuffe" before, much better acted to a much better house.

It was hot, snapped Mr Sterne. Bah! it was uncomfortable; a cigar in the open would be worth all this nonsensical display. For himself, he was sick of "Tartuffe."

"Cigars!" echoed Legros, displaying a very elegantly embroidered cigarette-case, "at your service, my friend. If you will smoke, I am devoted to Madame until your return. I fear you are ill in the head, my friend. Take—take as many as you will."

Godfrey extracted one or two of the delicately-rolled papers. With forced courtesy he turned to his wife—

"You don't object, Jane? I'm feeling ill in

the head, as Monsieur expresses it. I shall return towards the close of the piece. Legros will see you get an ice if you wish it. I know you are addicted to ices. Have you a light there?" restoring the embroidered case to his friend.

What could Jane do? She forced a laugh and bit her lip, and assented with indifference so well assumed, that her husband thought it real. When next Miss Thorold glanced up at the box "*au deuxième*," she saw two faces only—Jane's and that of Legros, the satisfied Frenchman looking nowise averse to his position or his company.

"That is an English belle; I have lost my heart to her." He crossed his fat hands upon the left of his jewel-studded shirt. "I have, indeed, if Madame will believe an old man. Ah! were Legros a quarter of a century younger, he would go in and win. Madame smiles. It is pleasant to see Madame smile. Madame has the smile so sweet, so affable, and the teeth so white. But a quarter of a century ago, Legros was irresistible to the ladies—ah! though it is himself who says it. She is splendid. I have known one who resembled to her a little. 'Le

temps se passe!" He sighed and shook his head. "Madame la Marquise de—but stop! if I commence to speak of my ill-fated friend, I stop myself ever. Who is this demoiselle? She is, with no doubt, of the aristocracy?"

"Oh, no!" said Jane, looking down on the top of Molly's head; "she's only a simple little girl."

"Little girl, did Madame say? She is one of those little girls who ought to marry herself very soon," and he chuckled a rumbling subdued laugh.

"Her father is a schoolmaster, I believe," said Jane; "but I know very little about her. What a time they are between the acts! It's a long piece isn't it?"

The play continued, but Mrs Godfrey Sterne leaned back behind the curtain, covering up her shoulders in her handsome Chinese shawl of soft crêpe, listening nervously and impatiently for her husband's returning step. She was married to the man she loved as much as she could love anything besides herself, and she was exacting of his attention, jealous of his admiration, selfish regarding him, as she was selfish regarding all that touched her own life. So far

that marriage, stretching over a few months, had not been elysium to her. His indifference to her appearance, his perfectly unbroken distant politeness, galled her, poor woman! and, in her jealousy, she was always contrasting his manner to herself with that he adopted towards Selina Thorold, and with what she remembered of his attention to Molly. Just now she had heard him echo with sincere unfeigned praise Monsieur Legros' warmly expressed admiration of the Belle Anglaise down there in the stalls; and remembering how suddenly he had gone out, preferring a solitary cigarette to her society, a spirit of revenge came driving across her brain—the mad wish of foolish women to create in the breasts of those they love, and would lay down their lives for, most likely, a spirit of jealousy. She leaned forward, and lightly laid her hand on the Frenchman's arm.

“Monsieur, I shall be infinitely obliged to you if you will take me to my carriage.”

“How! Madame is tired of the spectacle already?”

Jane shrugged her shoulders, gathering her cloak about her. She could not bury her bitter-

ness, but turning to him, looked him in the face with a laugh.

"Yes! You may tell my husband I'm sick of 'Tartuffe,' like himself."

"Ah, je vois!" murmured Legros, throwing up his eyes compassionately, and offering his arm.

They passed down the stairs, out to the street. Jane's carriage, hired for the night, was found in waiting; and the Frenchman saw her into it, bowed his adieux, graciously waived her thanks, shouted to the drowsy-eyed driver, "Hotel Meurice!" and returned to the vacated box, shrugging his shoulders, and muttering with a significant smile—

"Marriage de convenance! Madame est riche. Monsieur—eh, bien! c'est un pauvre diable!"

"Tiens!" after a pause, "how badly they act to-night! Last time I saw 'Tartuffe,' it was the old Samson who played. There was a clever man—there was an actor! My faith! he must have had the spirit of a hypocrite shut up in his skin to have acted so! Well! I could act 'Tartuffe.' I should do credit to the character. Legros, take to the stage, and make a lot of money, and go to England for a wife. A school-master's daughter! Alas! Mademoiselle, if you

are poor, even your counterfeit golden curls will not supply the want of gold in your purse. Legros gives you up! He relinquishes your charms to other arms, but it is with a sigh. Beauty is all one desires in a mistress. But hey! one wants solidity with the expensiveness of a wife!"

Then the wicked old fellow put up his lorgnettes, and picked out friends in various parts of the theatre, and swore at Godfrey for his tardiness, being anxious to join one or two compeers at a *recherché* supper given—well, we will not reveal where, or by what persons; and was of course all smoothness and smiles when the tawny-bearded Englishman showed his face at the box-door.

"Still entranced, Monsieur?" spoke Godfrey, a bit of his old quizzing propensities showing itself in his eye and mouth. "You don't know our English line—'And beauty draws us with a single hair,'—eh?"

Then immediately perceiving that his friend and himself were the only occupants of the box, his tone changed, his eye dilated.

"Madame, she is gone?"

"Mais, yes. You see, my dear friend, Madame did not care for the spectacle without you. But



had it been the old Samson, she would have waited. Yes ; he would have captivated her. My friend, I had the pleasure of calling her carriage—she drove home. Let me see ! there is an hour or more. The cigarettes ! you found them good to smoke. They should have been good, for they are of the finest tobacco of the world.”

Mr Sterne’s face was dark as a thunder-cloud ; he forced a smile.

“Thank you—yes ; they were excellent cigarettes—never smoked better. I ’m obliged to you for your trouble, Legros. Sorry my wife should have disturbed your enjoyment—my fault, of course. The theatre’s over-heated, and Mrs Sterne doubtless felt it ; hence the reason of her abrupt departure. You dine with us to-morrow, remember. We return to England shortly, and this may be our last chance of seeing you here. I ’ll try and match your tobacco, Legros. Good-night.” And he slammed the box-door, leaving the fat Frenchman to lean back in one fauteuil, put his feet on a second, and his crush-hat on the third ; the while he himself found his way back on foot to the Hotel Meurice, going at once to his wife’s apartment.

Jane, having dismissed her maid, sat in a white

peignoir, her hair plaited beneath a dainty muslin cap ; on her knees she held a book—*Mrs Jer-mingham's Journal*, a book she had read several times before, but of which, on this identical evening, she had not perused a line. She had had time to sober down, and with the transit of her excitement, had passed likewise her jealousy and her courage. She began to be afraid she had done a foolish thing, and she made up her mind to say that she too had found the heat unbearable, and to keep silence concerning the true motive to her action—pique mixed with indignation. She looked up with heavy eyes. She would have risen and kissed him, but something in his face and manner repelled her.

The first thing he did was to take the book from her hands, to the which, in something like fright, she had lowered her eyes under a feint of reading.

“Give up that trash for a second or so, Jane. I have something to say to you.”

She sat looking at him with aggravating calm ; it grated on his fierce mood, this passive silence, yet he struggled to speak quietly.

“Why did you so suddenly quit the theatre to-night ? What spirit of caprice guided you ?”

"It was hot," limply asserted Jane.

"Was the heat so unendurable that you could not endure it until I returned?"

"You couldn't endure it," she said slowly; "you didn't try. Why should I? I thought I could please myself. It pleased me to come home."

"Really! And you gave Monsieur Legros no reason for this proceeding?"

"No, it wasn't necessary, — of course he guessed."

"Of course he did; and you are mistaken, Madame, if you think I have not guessed also. My intellect is astuter than you credit."

"Well," said Jane, laughing low, "if you know, then, what need to worry me about it? I didn't care for your friend Legros, Godfrey."

"Your taste is better than I supposed. But understand this, Jane, I will have none of these little exhibitions of temper before my friends. You may keep such displays for our apartment."

She laughed again; she twirled her wedding-ring round her finger.

"Is that all?"

"That is all."

She got up and hung her rings to the stand on

her toilet-table. Jealously tugged again at her heart-strings ; she could not let the matter end there : to the death of all her peace, she went on—

“Did you admire me to-night, Godfrey ?”

“That style of dress is not suited to continental theatres. I told you so before we started. You should have gone in your bonnet, or in a high silk.”

“I heard you admiring a lady who wore evening-dress,” she said calmly, looking at her face in the glass. “Is that the style you would like me to imitate—plain white and long curls, like this ?”

She let down her hair; it was fine and black, and of considerable length. She could not see his countenance ; his voice came huskily.

“Like Miss Bloomfield’s ? No, Jane; she is a mere child ; besides, you are most unlike.”

“Yes ; if I were Miss Bloomfield, you would admire your wife more.”

There was no answer ; she stood, still with her back to him, looking into the glass.

“And if she were your wife, you wouldn’t leave her alone with a nasty Frenchman. If you think so much of her, why didn’t you marry her ?”

"My God! why not?"

It broke upon her ears, the sharply-uttered exclamation, like a sob. She turned round suddenly; upright he stood, white to the lips.

"Jane," he said, his hand on her bare arm, "for heaven's sake, be careful what you say."

She only laughed again, a half-reckless laugh.

"Say! I only say, why didn't you marry Molly Bloomfield instead of me? Was it because I had the money?"

She felt his hand tremble; she triumphed; but anguish came with the next moment.

"Godfrey, I am sure you loved Molly more than you have ever loved me."

He drew his hand away from the round, white arm; she caught a glint of tears in his eyes.

"God knows you have spoken the truth, Jane," he said, with inexpressible bitterness.

She looked at him steadily for a moment, then she went back to her seat on the couch at the foot of the bed, and pitifully cried; her husband followed to her side.

"Jane," he said, and his voice sounded faint as that of the Lotus-eaters, "we can do nothing now, but try and make the best of each other. If you bear with me, I'll not make a bad husband. I

never pretended to love you much—that you know—that I told you before we married. This may give you comfort perhaps. I know not if Molly Bloomfield ever cared for me.”

He quitted the room. She sat crying long hours ; at last, wearied, she crept into bed, repeating—

“And so he married me for my money !”

## CHAPTER XI.

### SHADOWS.

OLD Legros was no infrequent visitor to the Louvre Hotel during the sojourn of Miss Thorold and her protégée in Paris ; and, to confess the truth, the English girl somewhat enjoyed the fun the courteous, greedy, worldly, old Frenchman's society afforded her, and began to look pleased, rather than cross, when he came "to make his little visit," in his faultlessly nice get-up, wearing always the most delicate lemon gloves, that looked as if they never knew what a hole meant, and might have been put on fresh each time he bowed himself into their sitting-room, exclaiming as he entered—

"Est-ce que c'est permis d'entrer ?" with the most insinuating smile in the world.

"Take my word for it, Sammy, the poor in a loomp is bad," moralised the Northern Farmer ; and in his heart Legros echoed the sentiment. He would no

more have married Molly, *minus* money, than he would have taken a chiffonière to wife. Not he. He couldn't live, he said to himself, on ragoût all the year round, weak *pot-au-feu*, or soup flavoured with garlic. Poverty was horrible to him, repulsive, ugly ; he was a man of taste, of ultra-refinement ; and, my dear friends, there is no room for a man to evince taste or cherish refinement in onion-water and four walls. His income was very small it was supposed, and yet no one knew how much, and no one treated him otherwise than as if he were of the cream of humanity ; though people sometimes ill-naturedly said Legros' dinners couldn't cost him five francs from one *jour de l'an* to the other. A good many dinners he ate at Miss Thorold's expense, contriving to get his seat as often as he could between herself and Molly at the *table-d'hôte*, and the oftener he dined, the better it pleased this wilful proud woman, who paid off his escort to different places of amusement in this way. Yet she began at last to trouble herself about Molly ; the child seemed always so glad to see him, so pleased when he brought her flowers from the pretty market in the Madeleine, so delighted when she could get an opportunity of teasing



him, and of driving him into a corner ; and Miss Thorold said to herself—

“Surely she wouldn’t like such a person as Legros! Preposterous! And yet he’s very useful to us in his way ; and I don’t know anything against him.”

No! Society held him a pleasant person, quite a desirable person with whom to make acquaintance—a man of the world—an interesting old traveller. His one fault was that he didn’t roll in money, and that he wasn’t a marrying man. But Society is not infallible, like the Pope, and Society makes terrible mistakes sometimes.

Molly began to feel a craving for home when she had been in Paris eighteen days or so. Letters came rarely from Blatchington, and conscience began to whisper that she was a selfish little creature, and that she had nursed her own sorrow to the forgetfulness of others. She stooped her head over a pot of lilies—they were walking through the flower-market of the Madeleine—and she said to Miss Thorold, in a half-sad tone, “Ah! doesn’t it remind you of England to see these sweet spring flowers?” And immediately a clear high voice pronounced her name, just as a trim little bouquetière, in

a white cap, besought her to buy the lilies, winding up with—

“Tiens ! ce monsieur achètera les fleurs pour mademoiselle. Voici, ma jolie chatte !” and she wrapped the blossoms in white paper, and thrust them into Molly’s hand. Percy Thorne put down five francs for the flowers, and the three stood chatting close to the steps of the church, Molly’s face suffused with pleasure.

“It is very funny how one meets old friends in this nice Paris,” she said, looking, he thought, wonderfully altered — older and graver and statelier than when he had last seen her, sitting wan and pale by the fireside at Blatchington.

“Yes,” he said, “it is funny.” Then, abruptly, “Is your sister here, Miss Bloomfield ?”

“I wish she were,” sighed Molly. “When did you leave England, Mr Thorne ? Did you see them at home before you started ?” in a breath.

“Yes ; I saw them about four months ago. I left them with the intention of going to Copenhagen. I have remained here instead.”

“This city fascinates you ?” smiled Miss Thorold.

“No !” He gave her back a weary reflection

of her smile. "I find it difficult to be far away. I am put on the staff of a cheap paper. **Work** is the loadstone that keeps me within easy access of England."

Selina looked her astonishment. Good taste, however, prompted her immediately to revert to other subjects, wondering very much what had driven one of the Thornes to seek employment of so poor a nature. She asked him if he had seen anything of the Sternes.

"No ; I was not aware they were in Paris. Miss Bloomfield, is your father better ?"

Molly started ; the lilies fell from her hand.

"Is Dadds ill ?" was all she could find voice to say.

"So ill he was, when I left the Poplars," spoke Percy, brusquely, "that it was an understood thing his life hung by a thread."

He had told the truth very roughly. His sense of justice fretted at the knowledge that Anne had all to bear alone, whilst this girl led the life of a fine lady in the gayest capital of Europe.

The revulsion of feeling was too much for Molly. She leaned faint against the church railings ; she was not strong enough yet to bear unmoved a shock like this.

"Sir," said Miss Thorold, "you have been too ungentle," and her eyes met his very gravely.

"Pardon me! I was unaware that she knew nothing," he answered, with emotion. "I have done her an injustice. No news is good news, they say, and it is possible things may have mended ere this. It was a trying winter."

Molly gathered up her flowers, and took Selina's hand.

"I must go home at once, by the next boat," she said, decisively. "If I stay away longer I shall go mad. How cruel of Anne never to have told me!"

"It argues well," said Percy, striving hard to cheer her.

"To-morrow, dear, if you wish it," spoke the indulgent friend, "you and I will go home *via* Calais and Dover. What do you say to that?"

Molly smiled assent, but words were stayed on her tongue by the unexpected appearance of Monsieur Legros, evidently playing the part of escort to a fashionable lady, whose features were concealed by a veil of handsome lace. People turned their heads to look at Madame, for there was something stately in the carriage of the full

round figure, and Legros' satisfaction was plainly depicted on his face.

"Tiens!" he says, recognising his English friends, and advancing with his obsequious bow, "here we are among us! How delightful! Madame Sterne has just left for you cards at the Louvre."

The lady lifted her veil.

"How d'ye do, Selina?" deigning Molly not even the coldest bow. "Monsieur Legros told us where you are staying. Is that Mr Thorne? How odd! What hotel are you in?"

"Near the St Lazare," he said.

"I don't know that quarter." Jane turned listlessly to her escort. "Monsieur Legros, is this where we get flowers? Am I not lucky, Selina, to have such a pleasant companion? Monsieur Legros knows Paris so well, he saves me no end of trouble. We have been to Père-la-Chaise this morning. Isn't it horrible! so weedy and ill-kept—such a wilderness! And we drove also to Notre Dame; and Monsieur Legros showed me that dreadful Morgue. I didn't go in, you know."

"Of course not," gravely said Selina, whilst Legros, drawing off one of his lemon gloves,

fingered various small bouquets on a stall near at hand.

"And we're going to the opera to-night, I believe ; so you see I'm doing Paris like an American."

Jane spoke quite quickly for her, a hot uncomfortable colour in her cheeks.

Selina looked around her for Godfrey.

"Is your husband not with you ?" she asked, brusquely.

"My husband !" Jane tossed her head with a laugh. "Oh, no ; we think it's pleasantest to act quite independently ; it is *à la-mode*, you know. He's seen all these sights, and I haven't ; and if he likes me to go about under Legros' wing, why shouldn't I ? He is very comic this fat little man, and as harmless as one of your pet doves."

"Are you going under his wing, as you call it, to the opera ?" said Selina, her lips compressed.

"I suppose Godfrey will come to-night," answered Jane, affecting carelessness.

"And if not, I should strongly advise you to stay at home."

Miss Thorold had scarcely spoken the words when Legros came back with his bouquet.

"Madame, I hope, will find these flowers of the

right colour ;" and then he added something in a low voice that failed to reach Selina's ear, though it brought a deeper red to Mrs Sterne's cheek.

She bent her head over the flowers.

"No," she said, hesitatingly ; "I don't think I can ; my husband objects. He says it is not the continental custom ;" and this time Selina caught Legros' whispered French accents.

"But Monsieur is, then, a little *exigeant*. Madame, you have the shoulders superb, the arms like marble. Beauty should always be rendered as attractive as possible. If you go with me alone, I insist——"

Drawing Molly's hand within her arm, Selina Thorold, with a hauteur she rarely evinced, bowed with queenlike grace to her newly-married cousin, ignored Legros' salute with one scornful sweeping glance, and passed on. She had forgotten Percy Thorne altogether, and he had too much gentleman-like feeling to follow her, having overheard the short colloquy, and taken in all that had failed to strike Molly's innocent mind. Shame and sorrow worked alternately in Miss Thorold's breast ; she saw the danger into which this poor unfortunate woman might be led, left to follow out as she chose

whatsoever her resentment, or her jealousy, or her misery might dictate. There was good in Jane, she argued, and Jane was a woman—as such, claiming sympathy and help. She remembered her own personal influence with Godfrey Sterne, and she resolved she would dare his displeasure and his wife's too, it being very probable she would incur both the one and the other, and go to him at once, telling him the truth. If it separated her from them both—she gulped down her tears—she had done her duty. Looking at the cards left by Mrs Sterne an hour ago, she read in Jane's scrawled pencil-marks, "Hotel Meurice ;" and acting on the moment's impulse, told Molly she had a little business to transact, and leaving her pet to a short solitude, went out again on a nowise pleasant errand.

Mr Sterne was smoking and reading the *Times* when she was ushered into the private room he had engaged at Jane's request. He flung the paper aside and seized her hand gladly ; he even brushed his lips with something of a rough kiss to her forehead.

"Sit down, Selina ; it cheers me to see you. You are looking almost handsome, Coz ; 'pon my word, quite charming."



"To you, perhaps ; I have no charms to other eyes. And whatever you do, Godfrey, be pleased to abstain from compliments ; I loathe them."

"Do you ? I wish Jane were like you in that respect ! She's never content unless I criticise admiringly every whisp of silk or stuff—it's all alike to me—she puts on. Aren't you somewhat surprised to find me acting the bachelor ? It is deuced comfortable, let me tell you."

"I am not surprised ; I have seen your wife already this morning. I was sorry to find her not in your society, but in that of a substitute unworthy of you."

Godfrey chucked his cigar out of the window.

"Now, Selina, say out your remonstrances, and have done with it. I always was a fool in your hands. You, by some incomprehensible magnetic power, rob me of free-will."

Miss Thorold bravely executed her mission. She was not a woman to colour or exaggerate, and he believed unqualified every syllable she uttered. Once or twice his lips moved. "I'll kick him down-stairs, the sneak—low villain !" But as she concluded, the words he spoke were few, concise, and quiet.

"It all turns on this, Selina ; she has found out

the whole truth. I married her for her money, and I married her loving Mary Bloomfield."

Miss Thorold sat still, inexpressibly grieved for Jane, inexpressibly grieved for Molly. She had said her say; it was her duty to guard Molly's secret. She leant her cheek against her hand in sorrowful meditation.

"Godfrey," she said, presently, "you have wronged Jane cruelly, and she knows it, and of course she suffers from it. Yet, she may forgive it and forget it, if you will only treat her fairly. Take her home to England, away from this horrible temptation, which, instead of weakening, you strengthen."

"No," he said, decisively; "she will never forget it. We have been married nearly five months," he added, in a gentler tone; "four more may bring her the comfort of motherhood, and with it forgiveness. We may be happier then, Selina."

"God grant it!" She rose. "We leave Paris to-morrow. Promise me, Godfrey, you will not prolong your stay here?"

He stood beside her, his hand on her shoulder, looking into her face.

"And if we follow you, Selina, she'll declare,"

in her jealousy, that it is intentional pursuance of Molly on my part. Good heaven ! you women are made up of freaks and fancies."

"Bring her to town—Molly goes to Blatchington ; she need have no fears of that sort."

"It shall be so, then."

He went with her to the conciergerie ; as they parted, he asked her if Molly ever spoke of him, and how ? Selina replied, in clear distinct tones—

"She never mentions your name except in a casual way. Why should she ?" And was gone.

"The world is a queer place," she mused, as she drove back to the Louvre—"a sad mass of contradictions. It's odd, how rarely people marry those they love—love, that ought to be the only bond of union. Godfrey didn't ; Molly hasn't ; and I—there is no marriage for me.

"Come round for me at three," she said to driver when the carriage stopped, setting her down at her destination. "I engage you for the afternoon. I wish to drive to Saint Cloud." "Molly," she said to herself, mounting the staircase, "should feast her eyes this last day on some grand old trees, spend a quiet time under the oaks of the park of Saint Cloud." But the opportunity was lost to Molly, and never can it

be recalled to her, now that the happy bright palace, with its simple exterior shutting in a wealth of artistic gems, remains a mere memory to France.

No ; Molly was seated in a low chair holding tightly a morsel of paper, and, springing to her feet, she held it out towards Miss Thorold—

“O my Dadds! my Dadds!”

Her friend read the telegram ; it ran thus :—

“Papa is dangerously ill, return at once!”

“Yes, dear,” she said in her bright energetic way—“we will catch the Dieppe boat to-night. We have time. You can drive from Newhaven to Blatchington, you know, if there should be no train immediately. Courage, sweetheart! the morning will find you at home.”

And little later than ten o'clock the day following, Molly was traversing in a fly the well-known roads, after such a night as she could never forget, she said—when the white waves of the Channel washed the steamer-deck, and the rough wind yelled as it whipped them into fury, whilst she lay, it seemed, between life and death, stretched upon a berth, from which, in the desperation of terrible sea-sickness, she cared little to rise. She had left her friend to change

money and pass the luggage through the custom-house at Newhaven; whilst she, the driver promised double fare for accelerated speed, was whirled on to the destined gate of the little white house on the hill.

Thickly the springing leaves with fairy-like colouring covered the boughs she had last looked upon in all the bareness of winter. Here and there came a vision of the sea, gleaming now with the sky's reflected blue, and with the light of sunbeams sporting on the dancing waves. Home scenery all this,—she knew it well. Alas! alas! would she know the home itself; perhaps now under the shadow of death. She wrung her hands in her agony. Yonder with its newly run-up houses, its old church-tower, its tiny shops, its simple monotonous life going on as usual, stood the small town of Seaford. They had turned now into the Blatchington road, and already a sense of calm, a breath of native sweetness, blown from green branches and blossoming roots, stole in to comfort the poor child through the open carriage windows. She waved her hand, with a smile even curving her sad lips, to a large-bonneted female crossing the cornfield, carrying a basket on her arm, for she recognised afar off

the gait and garments peculiar to Miss Maria, and instinctively she knew that they were making for the same small dwelling.

Then the driver was paid in a lavish way and dismissed, and trembling fingers lifted the latch of the wicker gate, and hurried steps took Molly into the passage of the dear home. Quietly as she entered in, one ear had caught the sound, and down the wooden stairs came Nanny, pale and worn, big circles round her eyes, care and pain and weariness written on her smooth brow, and the sisters clasped each other tightly, and spoke in whispers, gently.

"Nanny," Molly choked with sobs—"you look so ill—and Dadds?"

"My darling! my darling! my darling!"

Molly lifted herself up straight. The intelligence conveyed by the two words, repeated with such a depth of tenderness, went straight to her heart. She stood stunned into composure.

"I know," she shivered.

"It is all over!" said Nanny, quietly. "He passed away in his sleep, dear. The last word he ever spoke was poor mamma's name."

Molly mounted the staircase. "I'm going to

see him," she said. Anne followed gently, and together they passed into Mr Bloomfield's bedroom. Beneath the white dimity canopy, his round head reposing on the pillow from which it would never more uplift itself, his lids closed upon the tender, meek blue eyes, his lips parted with a faint peaceful smile, his hands crossed upon the coverlid, whereon were scattered fair flowers, lay all that was left to them of their fond old father, the Dadds who had done his best, in his loving, foolish fashion, to spoil them both from the happy days of their childhood, unto this, his last.

"Oh, my dear love! and I was not with you," moaned Molly, kneeling down by the bed, and putting her golden-haired head beside his on the pillow, kissing his mouth,—kisses that, alas! for the first time were given unreturned—over and over again, calling him by tender epithets, of little meaning singly, but of mighty force as linked to the days gone by. And Nanny crept out of the room, judging it kinder to let the grief have way, that the o'er-fraught heart might find solace in the only two things that could soothe the poor little sister in her great trouble, tears and prayer, by which— in the noble speech of Arthur

to Sir Bedivere, spoken from the dusky barge  
that was to bear him to Avilion—

——“The whole round world is every way  
Bound with gold chains about the feet of God.”



## CHAPTER XII.

### COLD CHARITY.

MISS PERKINS gave it out in Seaford that everything concerning Mr Bloomfield's funeral rites had been "most properly and genteelly done ;" and as she and Sally, and the old clergyman from Blatchington church, and two stout labourers, who had known the "master" long, whose sorrowful business it was to carry the pall, were the only people invited to the ceremony, it was impossible to contradict her affirmation.

Miss Perkins declared that, never in all her born days, had she attended anything prettier than this sad breakfast, at which no one ate a morsel, though, to be sure, she and poor Molly had gulped down a spoonful of nice hot tea. Such a white cloth on the table, and all round sweet smelling flowers, and an immense bunch of violets, white and purple, laid upon the coffin as 'twas borne off. So there was another grave

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dug in Blatchington churchyard, and pretty soon after a house to be let on Blatchington Hill, for Nanny's scholars were not sufficiently numerous or remunerative to keep up such an establishment; finally, a Lewes clerk thought he'd like to marry and live in this region, and as the house was cheap he took it; and then was heard the auctioneer's hammer knocking down, for a few pounds only, the household gods that had stood, upwards of twenty years, the roughness of time, but never hitherto experienced the scorn of mankind.

The current of our little women's destinies bore them different ways—one remained awhile as bird of passage in the neat prim home, sheltering beneath its roof the two kind maiden ladies; and the other floated comfortably on the tide of affluence, adopted in verity as a luxury in the house of Thorold. Here Molly settled, with an ease that charmed her gentle ladyship, into elegance and refinement, picking up some few accomplishments and staunch Tory principles; and, what is more to the purpose, a little of her old health.

Sir George, who had the ill grace to grumble at the first, when he found a second expensive

item of the feminine gender attached as a permanency to his weekly accounts, including extra ribbons and trinkets and so forth, gave in after a while in his gruff good-natured way, contenting himself with a sharp—

“Hang it, if you want to increase your family, why not take a boy?”

Her ladyship preached down this objection of the General's to her pet's sex, by a hoard of excellent and unanswerable reasons, such as—

“She knew no nice boys. She couldn't have her old gowns altered to fit a boy. A boy would certainly have turned out a scamp or a radical; and then (which was a very forcibly true remark), Thorold Thorold couldn't marry a boy.”

Virtue brings its own reward, and in the end the virtuous endurance of the ex-soldier was paid up.

Molly retained her grateful heart in the midst of all this petting and comparative grandeur, and did not change, although she had a fine piano to play upon, and a singing master, who made her laugh by insisting on her practising before a glass, to keep her tongue down; and learned the waltz and galop, and the orthodox square dances. In spite of all these accomplishments, our little

girl dutifully cherished the memory of the poor old man whose spirit had gone, she hoped and believed,

“To where, beyond these regions, there is peace ;”

did not forget she was just a village schoolmaster's daughter, and that she had no claims to this aristocratic life.

All women are humbugs in their way, more or less, and a fascinating woman is the greatest humbug of all. Mary Bloomfield found out the General's weak points, and through them won a way into the trenches of his heart—listened patiently to all he could tell her of his soldiering, picked up his own dislike to the Gladstonian government, beginning to look at the names of Storkes and Cardwell through less mental obscurity than formerly ; learned the difference between a brigade and a battalion, and how an officer might be a captain in his regiment and a colonel in the army ; read aloud to him from Colburn, and hunted up his service and that of his veteran friends in the well-fingered pages of his Hart—so that he began to look for her sweet face, had she been absent for the day, with a pleasure and an interest equal to, if not

greater than, that he took in the gigantic scheme of Army Administration and Reform.

"It is all for Thorold's sake, of course," mused her ladyship ; and for once she followed the path of wisdom, and strategically planned a meeting between the young people, in silence, having faith in happy accidents. She concocted a pleasant little note to her nephew, in which she hinted of Molly's residence with them *en famille*, telling him he was to appear ignorant of the fact, and to come at once, as if by chance, "for I'm sure," she wrote, "the child likes you, and you know, my dear boy, I had it from your own lips, that you cared for her as the dearest girl alive."

The young captain, reading her letter in the dull little black hut, E Lines, North Camp, Aldershott, crushed it in his hand when he came to the concluding period, and to his Aunt's unqualified surprise, sent back word that he couldn't "chance it yet," and desired his kind regards to Miss Bloomfield, in an open, unlover-like way.

Nothing more to his advantage than Molly's flat refusal to marry him had ever befallen Thorold Thorold in the course of his life ; the few young ladies of the biggest camp in the Britannic Isles, and of sundry other stations in

which the 3d Battalion of the Rifles had been at various times quartered, had all information that this young fellow was a very desirable match, and found out that he was an extremely pleasant and a well-read man, "He knew so much; oh, ever so much *for an officer*" (ladies do not sound intellectual depths as a rule—they judge from the width of the surface), "and he danced divinely; and was quite an artist in croquet, and wore such a splendid diamond on his little finger." But this was all before the long leave; the tone concerning him altered when he came back, and the young ladies missed the diamond from his finger; missed him from the ball-room, and the club-house croquet ground, declared that he was engaged, and gave him up reluctantly. In the mess-room his mates thought him changed for the better—he was more of a man and less of a fop; he took to studying his profession, going in heavily for the art of war, throwing aside his little magazines as he threw aside his jewellery. Molly's sarcastic allusion to his rings had touched him in the right place, and stones were precious to him no more.

Leaving Thorold Thorold to his drill, to his field days, and that horrible route marching; to

his rides over the Long Valley, in company with the brother officers who were rich enough to keep their horses minus government allowance of forage ;—likewise, leaving Molly to her parties, to her lessons, to her drive in the Ladies' Mile, to an occasional canter in the Row,—let us return awhile to the small village on the Sussex coast, and follow up the thread of spinster Anne's existence. She was, metaphorically speaking, studying in earnest the map of life, preparatory to commencing the battle in which women, all along their ranks in crises of danger, in face of terrible odds, have, nobly and heroically, borne their part. Not to burden others, not to shift the weight of her young life upon the shoulders of her friends ; to "get along," independently, it was all she dreamed of, or longed for, poor child.

"In the rush and tumult of the world, it is likely that the *summum bonum* of nine-tenths of mankind is embraced in that purely negative happiness—to get along."

Anne Bloomfield belonged to the struggling nine-tenths, now that her father was laid in the grave, no less than the mother of "Ginx's Baby." The difficulties that beset her in working out the

problem, day by day, the failure and disappointment—advertisements sent to the *Times* winning no reply, applications to the two or three relatives left her in the world, receiving, as the weeks flew by, their “consideration,” no more—began to tell at last upon her courage and her health.

The good old maiden ladies would accept nothing from her slender purse, and she felt, with anxiety and pain, they could ill afford so long a visit. She must try new measures. She would go to town, she thought. Oh, surely, in the vast city there must be a surplus of employment; there must be work for these two little hands, for this one mouth more! She would find there children to teach, or bonnets to trim; she was deft with her fingers, and she was neither proud nor ambitious—would find means to satisfy with something, no matter what, a craving appetite; to close eyes at night under some shadow or shelter—for there, as here, she murmured, will be to watch over me the God who lets not one sparrow fall to the ground.

She sat sewing at a piece of linen that Miss Sally’s scissors had shaped into the form of a mysterious garment, with a sad little face, lowered eyes, and depressed mouth, when the



owner of the said article of under-apparel turned the handle of the sitting-room door, her cheeks red with "being so flustered," and admitted into the neat little sanctum the rector's lady.

"Mrs Ogden wants to speak to you, Nanny," said Miss Sally, edging her way round the table, and blushingly struggling to hide the obnoxious needlework under the sofa, "so I'll leave you, my dear, to unrestrained converse ;" and having dexterously left her work behind her in a place of concealment, she meekly retired to the rolling-pin, closing the door tight.

The rector's wife possessed herself of a chair opposite to Anne, and put on her spectacles. Very thin, and very straight, very precise, and excruciatingly ladylike was Mrs Ogden in person and deportment.

"I have called, Miss Bloomfield, at this early hour, in consequence of having heard of you from a friend by this morning's post."

Anne bowed. Mrs Ogden produced a letter, which she unfolded and held in her hand as proof that her statement was correct.

"Am I right in understanding that you are seeking employment, Miss Bloomfield ?"

"Perfectly! I have sought it since my father died."

"Indeed! Had I known it earlier, I might have rendered you more prompt assistance. I am myself looking out for a governess for my children."

Anne knew the hopeful progeny of her "friend in need"—prim, selfish, overbearing. It would be a difficult task, yet in her forlornness what right had she to shrink from meeting difficulty? She bowed again; her fingers were fast knit together. In her anxiety and her longing to make a good impression, she showed a timid fragile creature, whom it would be easy, apparently, to mould on any pattern.

"You are willing to teach, Miss Bloomfield?"

"I should prefer it to anything else," Anne said, thinking sadly how little "else" she could command.

"I have been told you teach well; at least," the lady concluded she had better modify the statement, "in your way; but of course you are very inexperienced. It is necessary I should know your attainments. You can impart the rudiments of French?"

"I think so," faltered Anne, in her extreme conscientiousness likely to depreciate herself.

"You only *think* so ; then we will lay that aside," Mrs Ogden smiled. "History and geography of course you undertake, and the use of the globes, and elementary arithmetic, and perhaps a little music ?"

"Yes !" Anne, who had read all her father's histories, including Hallam's "Middle Ages," Alison's "Europe," and Sir Edmund Creasy's "Constitutional History," who had puzzled out a few problems in Euclid, and gone, as her father was proud of saying, "slap through Colenso like a boy," answered in the affirmative with a consciousness she was speaking the truth.

"My requirements, you will understand, are few. I can't expect very much from you in the way of literary attainment. You will be willing, I suppose, to make yourself generally useful ?"

"What do you mean by 'generally useful ?'" asked Anne, wisely determined to see her way clear before her.

"My dear Miss Bloomfield, a child would understand the term. I should expect you to walk out with the children if I wished it ; to read to me ; to mend their things ; not to object

to wash and dress them when I give the nurse a holiday. That is being generally useful."

"I can do these things," Anne said, simply.

"Very well. And about the salary. What remuneration do you expect for your services?"

Anne lifted her deep grey eyes.

"Mrs Ogden, I leave that to your sense of what is right; to what you judge will repay me for my time and labour."

"My husband agrees to offer you twenty pounds a year and your laundress's expenses, which of course must be limited to a certain sum."

"So you think I am worth only twenty pounds a-year!"

Anne uttered the words aloud involuntarily, her face propped between her hands, her eyes fixed dreamily on the gay-patterned wall-paper.

"That is scarcely more than one shilling a day. I don't suppose it would be a penny an hour!"

She was revolving in her mind the possibility of earning double this in a less shackled state of life, when the sharp grating tones of an indignant voice brought her the consciousness that she was thinking audibly.

"Miss Bloomfield, many a lady with twice

your accomplishments would be thankful to get twenty pounds a year, and her board and laundress, in a comfortable Christian home ; but of course please yourself."

"I accept your proposal, Mrs Ogden," said Anne, her eyes filling with tears. "I will be your governess on the terms you mention."

"Very well." The lady looked pleased, as indeed she felt. "I shall be glad to have such a nice, well-behaved person to teach my children. One thing more, Miss Bloomfield, I shall expect you to hear them their catechism and the collect each Sunday."

"I shall obey your wishes."

Mrs Ogden pocketed the letter she had held throughout the dialogue, and rose to go; her expression was one of perfect self-satisfaction; she had done a charitable act, and she had secured an excellent governess. She held out her hand to Anne.

"My husband is a stanch Calvinist, Miss Bloomfield. You, I hope, will learn to respect him as he deserves. He is very tenacious of his principles."

"When principles are convictions," said Anne, "that is right."

"Just so. He is very particular that we should all be of one mind—we beneath his roof. I have forgotten to touch upon religious views."

"Do you not think,"—colour came into Anne's face,—“it is well to allow each one their opinions?”

"Certainly not : members of a family must all think alike, as must members of the true Christian church. There are not two ways to heaven, Miss Bloomfield."

"I think the ways are thousand, not to be marked out nor counted," said Anne.

"Of course, Miss Bloomfield, you hold the doctrine of predestination?"

"I have never thought about it!"

"Never thought about it! What deplorable ignorance! Alas! my husband must talk to you, poor girl. At any rate, you believe in eternal punishment?"

"I do not."

Firmly and shortly Anne gave her answer. Mrs Ogden let fall her hand in horror, drew her shawl about her, moved back a step.

"What an escape! What a black sheep I have been about to bring into the fold amongst my little ones!"

"I should never have interfered with the doctrine you have taught your children," said Anne, calmly, despair in her still face.

"I must withdraw my offer. I cannot take a heretic into my family, Miss Bloomfield. I trust you will give up your dreadful notions and find out the truth. I wish you good-morning."

She bowed her head, and swept out majestically, the rustle of her silk dress remained in Anne's ear long after the substance had disappeared; she sat down on the chintz-covered sofa, and burst into a passionate fit of crying.

"It's a pity you didn't try to humour her, my dear," spoke Miss Perkins, sensibly, when she had heard the truth from Nanny's trembling lips; "I daresay she'd have been kind, and perhaps you'd have got to think their way in time."

"No!" said Anne Bloomfield, resolutely, her eye kindling bright; "I can never play the hypocrite, not even to earn my bread and butter."

"If bread and butter's all you want, my dear, you can get that along with us. Sally and me would be glad if you'd stay and share our humble home, we would indeed,"—Miss Perkins knitted fast, and only looked at her work; "and if I may say so without offending you, if you'd lend us a

hand in the house of a morning, why we needn't keep Susan, and her keep's considerable more than yours. As to your dress, child, you don't need much of that, and a scholar or two like as you had on the Hill, would bring in the few pounds necessary. There, my dear, I'm a blunt old woman, and I dare say I haven't put it as pretty as I might."

"God bless you!" said Anne, and her voice broke with grateful feeling, "and may He reward you; but though I thank you with my whole heart, I cannot accept your goodness any longer. Already I owe you that which all the money in the treasury couldn't repay!" She tried to smile through her tears as she went on—"No; I shall go to London and try to live there, that I may see Molly sometimes. You and Molly are all I have to love now. Perhaps Lady Thorold may know of some one who wants a governess, some one who won't ask me if I believe in predestination."

She kept to her determination; it was not to be shaken. She would go to town, she said. Betty had a little house at the north end, and let lodgings; she would get a small room there. Her money would last out a few weeks, and if it



failed, why, then (with a very white face, and a very mournful laugh), she must either come back to live on the dear old ladies' bounty, or she must act the repentant sinner, and so play her cards that Mrs Ogden might have mercy on the black sheep!

## CHAPTER XIII.

### IN WHICH DIFFERENCES GET SQUARED.

FOR some reason or other, Nanny never mentioned Mrs Thorne's name, never went or wrote to her for the help that it was probable she, with her large circle of wealthy friends, had it in her power to bestow.

Miss Maria, observant and shrewd, noticed her young friend's reticence on this point, respected her reasons, not caring to peer curiously into them, and kept her suspicions to herself.

"No," she said to Sally, tying on her best bonnet before her bedroom glass, "I told you no one should ever know what Mrs Thorne gave out about Mr Bloomfield that night at the Lodge, and now he's lying in his grave, poor man, I'd cut my tongue out sooner than I'd breathe a word. But I'm going to see Madam T. for all that. Is those curls even, Sister?"

Sally averring that the two prim grey locks, pinned close against her cheeks, *were* even, she

counted a few shillings, dropped them into her purse, and walking to the Terminus Hotel, hired a hack, and drove off to the Poplars. What passed between these two stiff women that afternoon in Mrs Thorne's gloomy drawing-room, space will not permit us to reveal.

If you, gentle reader, feel any twinge of curiosity to know how the one poor spinster, who had spinsterhood and comparative poverty against her, contrived to storm the conscience of the hard, unbending mistress of the Poplars, who, in her own house, commanded the advantageous fort, you must be content to know as little of the unequal contest as did gentle, curious Miss Sally, whose curiosity fate and her sister decreed never should be gratified. The coalscuttle bonnet and the well-worn Paisley carried the day, overriding Jay's last thing in mourning caps and Lyons silks; and Miss Perkins drove home, conscious that she had done a good stroke of business, conscious that she had attacked Mrs Thorne "straight out," and discovered more than she ought, perhaps, leaving her worsted, regretful, and in tears.

"Instead of standing doing nothing, like an idiot," she said to Sally, who awaited her return,

and was gaping her astonishment, "why not get me my bandbox, and move about? Of late, Sister, you've indulged a bit too much."

"Nanny says she's going up to-morrow," meekly rejoined Sally, doing as she was bid, and dragging into view Miss Maria's double bandbox.

"Going up! up where?" echoed the latter, settling her cap-strings. "Hand us a pin. If you mean going up to town,"—of late she had dropped the "London," as being less genteel,— "you're mistaken, Sally."

"She told me so," said Sally, offering the pin-cushion.

"And I tell you I know better. Mark my words, you'll see she don't. If she goes to town to-morrow, you may go with her, that's all."

"Lor, Sister, what do you mean?"

"Don't ask questions, and you'll get no crooked answers."

"Your collar's awry, Sister. Nanny's packing her box."

"Let her pack, 'twill amuse her."

"It's rather a tiring amusement, and she with a headache, and such red eyes. O Sister!

if you've any good news to give her, don't keep it from her!"

"I've no news at all, Sally. There! just hush about it, will you, like a good child?"

The child of forty summers held her tongue obediently, but her gentle heart was sore, sore for that poor little creature stooping her tired brow over a plain black box in the room adjoining, and sore for reason also that her sister had a secret which she was not permitted to share. She lived all the rest of the day on the hope that Miss Maria would let the cat out of the bag before night, but not so much as one of the cat's ears did she behold; and all night she dozed under the impression that she would be sure to know the secret in the morning; but prayers were read, and breakfast over, and the cloth removed, and never so much as a syllable of it had she extracted.

"This isn't turning-out day," she said, on seeing Miss Maria double up the parlour tablecloths and antimacassars ominously; "so what d' you do that for, Sister?"

"It's going to be swept," grimly spoke Maria, not without a twinkle in her eye, "if you don't object, Sal. Clear away those books, and throw the dead flowers into the yard."

Miss Sally being forced to retire with the dead flowers, shook her head doubtfully.

"Something's up, and it must concern Nanny, I'm sure ; and yet Maria thinks it's for the best to keep her caution. Dear me! what ever is it?"

As she flung the flowers into the dust-hole, Nanny's voice broke in upon her soliloquy.

"Have you found a goblin in the dust, Miss Sally? There! I've startled you ; how careless of me! Time's getting on, isn't it? You see I'm ready."

True enough, she stood there dressed for departure. Setting down the glass jar, the tender-hearted spinster clasped her tightly round the neck.

"I can't abear to think of it," she said, her meek eyes brimming over. "You, all alone, Nanny, in that wicked London. Are you really going, dear, or are you gaming me?"

"Don't cry, Sally. I shall be under my old nurse's care. She brought me up from a baby, you know, and she has just as much sense as a lawyer. I'll make a fortune, and come back to spend it in Seaford. I'll buy up all the peppermint bulls'-eyes in the place, and exhaust the store of gingerbread, and stay with you and Miss

Maria—I was nearly forgetting the ‘Miss’—as long as I live. Sit down, and talk a little, for it’s delightfully sunny here.”

They sat down close to the pump, and Anne rattled on at merry pace, sketching all kinds of imaginary good luck, building castles that were to shut within their walls every species of happiness known to mortals, when the gorgeous fabric was knocked down by a third voice, and the fabulous bricks and mortar splintered and cracked, and vanished on the air.

“I want you, Nanny, if you please—not you, Sally,” added Miss Maria, beckoning from the doorway, and repelling the advance of her sister with the same hand by which she summoned Nanny. “This is a visitor to Nanny, not to us, so we’ll get on with our duties.”

“Who is it?” said Anne.

“My dear, in the parlour, of course,” replied Miss Maria, feigning to misunderstand her friend. “I’m going to step across to Mogden’s a moment; but if you want biscuits and wine, you’ll find ’em in the cupboard, ready.”

So, unheralded and unsuspecting, Anne walked calmly into the little sitting-room, looking like a pearl in a dark setting, pale and fair in her

deep black dress, that echoed the life-loss you found written in her sweet weary face. But when she found herself once more in presence of Mrs Thorne, red flushed to her temples, the stream of pain pumped up from the well of the heart. Stiff and erect she stood, her hands joined, her lips closed ; it was not for her to speak the first word of formal greeting, it was not for her to offer the salutation that we English give our friends, and, very often, our enemies too. She clenched her fingers, the nails bit into the palms.

"Anne," said Mrs Thorne, and hot tears crowded to the child's eyes at hearing her name so uttered, "I have come to ask you to forgive me for your father's sake."

The colourless lips quivered visibly, the clasped hands shook with a tremor that pervaded all Anne's limbs.

"If not for your father's sake," resumed Mrs Thorne, herself much agitated, "for my son's. Do you hear me, Anne ? I ask you to forgive me for my son's sake !"

Anne stretched her hands before her face ; it was too sudden ; the happiness was harder to bear than reproach, or cruelty, or anxiety. She wept.



"I did not know until yesterday," said Mrs Thorne, drawing nearer, "that Mr Bloomfield was dead. I have been in town awhile, and on return I suppose nobody cared to give me current news of the places round about. I did not know that you were alone and unfriended and unprovided for."

Anne looked up, her eyes dim.

"I am neither alone, nor unfriended," she said, emphatically. "My wants are few. I hope I shall be able to find work that will enable me to provide for myself."

"I have come to-day with an urgent request."

Anne interrupted her, her eyes flashing.

"You made a request to me once. I have kept it so well, you need never repeat it. I refused your son. I have heard, all these months, not a line from him, not a word of him. Take back, Mrs Thorne, the reminder you sent me of my promise. I have never shown it. I have never parted with it, night or day, till now."

Trembling with excitement, she drew forth the little note that she had worn by day, that she had placed beneath her pillow at night, and gave it into Mrs Thorne's hand.

"This is an unnecessary act," the latter said,

looking, not at the note, but hard into Anne's face, "the counterpart was given me by my son."

"Your son!" cried Anne. "Ah! Madam, believe me, it was no doing of mine; he knew nothing of it from me. He told me that he loved me, and of his love I am convinced; he entreated me to forswear my word to you, but I kept it; and though at the very time I carried this letter in my bosom, and could have shown him how cruelly false you were to me, I did not do it—I did not, upon my honour, before God."

"He asked you to marry him, Anne—he told you that he loved you—you believed him?"

"Believed him! Are you his mother and you doubt his truth? I have no answer to that question; but to the others, Yes, oh, yes!"

Mrs Thorne was silent awhile, crumpling the letter in her hand; presently she said, in deliberate, low tones—

"Anne Bloomfield, was that your final determination? Do you mean you will now *never* marry my son?"

"Never!" Anne spoke the truth with fearlessness. "Never, as long as you are living, Mrs Thorne."

"You mean,—the mother averted her face,—

"that you will marry, you and Percy, when I am dead?"

"If God were to prolong our lives and our affection—Yes!"

It was a strange confession. The girl, in her excitement, the words partly wrung from her lips, had revealed in one unvarnished sentence the intensity of her love—love that could bear the brunt, perhaps, of long hard years, that could remain steadfast to eternity. Mrs Thorne's face worked in every muscle; there was only one obstacle to their happiness, that obstacle would be annihilated by a death—her own. Not given to romance, not a woman of many words, but of strong feelings, of iron nerve, she turned again towards Anne; she uttered no protestations; demonstrativeness of any kind was foreign to her nature.

"Anne, I have not come to speak to you of that letter; it is a circumstance you have accidentally brought forward, on which I did not calculate. I appreciate both your honesty and your honour—that is enough. I am sorry for what I have done. I am here to ask your forgiveness. Do you withhold or grant it?"

"I grant it with my whole heart," said Anne,

touching her black dress. "Ah! if you had wronged me tenfold, for your goodness to him I should have pardoned you, I hope."

Mrs Thorne blushed. She had not yet fulfilled her mission. She could not yet accept gratitude.

"Your thanks hurt me—I will not have them. Anne, you are looking for a home?"

"Yes; I am going to seek a governess's place somewhere—anywhere."

"I offer you the home of which I robbed you. Don't turn away, for heaven's sake—don't cherish pride and indignation against me. I have suffered. I am punished. I cannot live without my son! Anne, come home with me, let it be *our* home, so that together we may win Percy back; for without your help, I shall never see my boy again—without your voice to call him, he will never return. I know him so well—I, who have read him like a book from childhood, my poor unfortunate son! I am a proud woman, but I must have lost much of my sternness, or I could not ask this of you. I could not be willing to share an affection with another woman that has been mine, only mine hitherto. I am motherless, and my heart is very chill. Will you not

come to me and be a daughter to me, Anne, and comfort me by calling Percy home?"

"Oh! mother, mother!" cried Anne. And here we must let the drop-scene fall awhile.

\* \* \* \* \*

Time runs away pretty quickly in this old globe of ours which has been spinning round the sun for so many centuries—runs away with a mighty load of human life upon his back, mowing down with ruthless sickle vegetable and animal existence as he runs; rending continents, scraping coast lines, playing with a volcanic ball, and spitting fire like a puzzling conjuror, or swallowing cities and commerce with his capacious mouth, and kicking great world-powers with the tip of his toe into oblivion; but the fictitious Time beats the real Time in velocity; and so the old father's wicked son has stolen a year out of our story, if you please, and catches you up, bearing you away from your last scene, depositing you in the Foreign Picture Gallery of the International Exhibition, before a charming piece of sculpture, a most bewitching, sorrowful little Cupid, riding on a tortoise, his chubby hands bound cruelly. Molly stood looking at the marble, her catalogue held loosely in one hand, swinging

from the other the daintiest lilac parasol, for she cannot yet bring herself to put aside, as her Ladyship would wish, the mourning in which these twelve months she has been draped.

"Dear little pet!" she thinks, "how I wish there weren't so many people here, that I might kiss your lovely mouth." So you see she at heart disapproved of the no-Cupid theory, and would rather have cut the marble god's leashes from these chubby little hands, than have cut away the legal shackles which keep her sex out of the Parliament House. Lady Thorold and Selina are looking at Delaroche's magnificent picture of the Austrian Woman; and Molly, in her rapturous criticism of the Cupid, forbears to follow them, and finds herself presently cut off from them by a small crowd of well-dressed people, for of course they are here on a half-crown day; and in the crowd her eyes pick out a well-known form, that of no less a personage than Thorold Thorold. He is beside her directly; and blushing, in the dangerous neighbourhood of the Cupid, she returns his greeting.

"More lovely than ever," is his inward comment; and true it is. You'd scarcely believe this elegant woman, with loosely braided red-gold

hair, and delicate-tinted face, was the very Molly whom we met long ago for the first time, with rough head and baggy shoes, curled up in a fishing-boat on the shingle at Seaford. Scarcely less remarkable is the change that our friend the magician Time has worked in the Captain himself. He is browner of skin ; he is no more the mere wisp of straw that he was ; he has abandoned stays, and jewels, and red ties, and *millefleurs*. Something of the old mischievous gleam this rencontre brings into Molly's eyes as she holds out her hand in greeting.

"This is odd," he says, half-jestingly ; and all the while she is conscious that she reigns in his heart still, for the same admiring glance that he cannot cloak meets hers, as of yore in the Lodge drawing-room, when lights and voices were equally low in the region of the piano. "I have never been here before on a swell-day. You are not alone?"

"Oh, no !" Molly indicated his old friends. "Shall we go to them ? I separated myself. I was lost—in love with this wee fellow."

She pointed down to the marble.

"Ah !" he said, as they moved on, "if he had only been bound, instead of free, in '69 !"

## CHAPTER XIV.

### GOOD-BYE.

THE ceremony is over—*the* ceremony that most young ladies long to figure in, and that not a few marry for. The knot has been tied amid a kneeling circle of fair maids ; the names have been signed in the vestry ; the bride has been kissed by many who, recalling the sweet rosy face and the tear-suffused blue eyes, would fain repeat the joke again to-day ; the organist, having been meandering along the keys in C major that he might be prepared for the marriage peal, now rolls out Mendelssohn's magnificent march ; and back to Orme Square drive Thorold Thorold and Molly—his wife ; other carriages follow rapidly, and finally the wedding-guests assemble around the breakfast-table.

Here, my friends, we behold, for the last time, most of the characters of our story in a friendly group ; you can pick them out, and individualise them if you will, by glancing down the



length of the snowy cloth. There is a smile genially disporting itself amid the furrows ploughed deep in the General's countenance ; you can see that he and his gentle, though somewhat fussy, spouse are both equally well-pleased in their different ways at the turn events have taken. He holds he has known nothing pluckier, he says to Mr Sterne, than his nephew's return to the charge, since dear old Sir James's plucky charge in the Crimea ; and as to brides, why Molly is the prettiest he has ever seen, except perhaps—haws and hems, and then out he jerks it—except his own.

Her Ladyship's face shows a little flustered to-day. Who can wonder ? Had she not virtually made this match ? Was it not she who, by skilful management, plot, tact—call it by whatsoever name you like—had brought the young people together ? She had planned it from the first ; it was all her doing, she declared to her daughter the eve before the wedding. Selina did not gainsay the triumph of the exclamation ; but she hinted, while sewing at satin favours, that it might have been written in heaven—decreed by fate.

“Fate had nothing to do with it,” cried her

gentle Ladyship, somewhat snappishly for her ;  
“that comes of your reading Emerson’s rubbish.”

The young people who have just been, according to the Prayer-book phrase, “joined together,” head the board with the General, looking supremely happy both ; she in modest quiet, he with infinite pride and gladness in his eyes. Molly plucks at the white buds in her bouquet, wondering, “Is this *my* wedding-day ? Is this *my* husband ? Am I Molly Bloom——”

No ; the blush tints, with just a deeper shade of pink, cheek and brow and throat. Never that any more, that little country maid of long ago !

Yonder are seated our spinster sisters, whom Miss Thorold has decoyed hither under pretence of its being a very simple party. Miss Sally is gleefully counting the number of guests and dishes, losing her reckoning powers every now and then by dint of having to accept or refuse some proffered delicacy. Miss Maria, scarcely yet recovered from the indignation excited in her breast by the frescoes of All Saints’, which she afterwards styled “them heathenish distracting pictures,” is conversing with Mrs Sterne on

the subject of the recently-concluded ceremony.

"Mine was much prettier," says Jane, emphatically.

"Was it, now? Well, I think it's the prettiest sight I've looked on since I went to the Confirmation at Brighton," simply put Miss Maria.

"I had twelve bridesmaids," affirmed the portly lady, a happy smile of retrospection creeping about her mouth. "I wish you had seen *my* wedding, Miss Perkins."

"Dear me! yes, I wish I had," returned the appreciative spinster lady, with a sigh of life-loss.

Jane did not, then, look back upon her marriage-day with regret, with a sick heart, with a crushed hope? Nay; in her nature there was not lasting power even of vindictiveness. The chamber of her memory was very small, it scarce held light enough to cherish a wrong. If Godfrey Sterne had married her for her money, well, he had married her; if he had loved Molly once, Molly was married now, and henceforth, of course, he would cease to care for her, for a wedding-ring was the implacable interdict laid upon romance.

She was Mrs Godfrey Sterne ; who now could rob her of that title ? Too phlegmatic to trouble herself to resent, not generous enough to say freely " I forgive," she yet forgave, because she forgot, and she forgot for the reason that there was probably no shock in the world that could have utterly weakened the one force of her character—unadulterated self-satisfaction.

To the right of Miss Sally sits Nanny, not a bridesmaid, for the weighty reason that she cast aside maidism for ever several weeks ago, when, in the quiet of little Blatchington Church, Percy Thorne ringed her finger.

" Your wedding wasn't like this, my dear," whispers Miss Sally, glancing timidly around, afraid that she had pitched her meek voice to too high a tone ; " and I'm thinking it is scarce becoming to make a younger sister's wedding so much fine——"

" Why," puts in Nanny, stopping her less by words than by her radiant smile, as she lays her hand on the hard, red fingers tapping the cloth, " Was it not my own doing, Miss Sally ? I think it was quite perfect," and for the moment all the brilliant crowd resolves itself into a group of rustics and little children—the scene into the

passion-flower-draped walls of Blatchington Church, and to her sweet clear eye is visioned her father's grave, as she saw it last in the sun, so that tears gather.

They do not fall. Mr Denny, who has been devoting himself equally to his good angel and his good appetite, rises to propose the health of the bride and bridegroom, with a face as long as though he were about to read the burial-service. Report, which saith any number of ill-natured things, said afterwards that the reverend gentleman uttered the word "brethren" in the course of his speech, though he dexterously contrived to smother this *lapsus linguæ* beneath the syllables of "ladies and gentlemen." Anyhow, proposing a toast was a sore trial and a great exertion to him, and required, as its complement, that he should upset a wine-glass, which done, he resumed his seat in mental agony better imagined than described, his face pale with excitement, and cold with perspiration.

"I'm afraid I didn't do it very well," he said, looking for comfort in Selina's face. There was not a grain of pity for him in those wickedly dancing, satirical eyes.

"Not as well as you might, Mr Denny. Never

mind, I've no doubt you will improve upon the occasion in your next sermon. I fancy I hear you launching forth against the extravagance and vanity and uselessness, setting aside the social martyrdom, of modern wedding-feasts. You will draw a parallel between such a gathering as this, and that gathering of the king's son in the parable, bringing it forward to your hearers boldly, vividly, as a type of what a marriage celebration ought to be—a time of mirth and rejoicing, not to such as do not want it, and who have all eaten beforehand, but to the poor and wretched, the ragged and empty and houseless. There, preach it, Mr Denny, and I'll go any distance to hear you."

"Would you?" asked the curate, doubtfully, feeling for the hundredth time that there was something in this strong expressive face utterly unintelligible to him.

"Another of your flights of fancy, Selina," speaks Mr Sterne, who had walked round to her side of the table; "which, being translated literally, means, take up these fragments that our greedy mouths have left, and divide them among the multitude; haul in the dirtiest, wickedest representatives of the human race, and seat

them down on your mother's new chintz to gobble. I'm not sure that it wouldn't be a noble example to spendthrifts, and I *am* sure, with you, Coz, 'twould be infinitely more amusing than this."

"It couldn't be done, my dear sir," said Mr Denny, holding out his champagne-glass as he beckons a waiter. "I assure you it really couldn't be done."

"No, that's the worst of it," assents Mr Sterne, restlessly stroking his tawny beard. "Convention won't let us do the right thing; we must keep to the correct thing."

"Did convention hold you to your betrothal, I wonder?" sighs Selina, looking from him bitter, clouded countenance to Molly.

Some people have the happy, or the unhappy, faculty of divining, almost magically, the thoughts of others. From his mind to hers ran magnetic wires, transmitting much that was absolutely hidden from common sight. She knew he could not trust his eyes or tongue to glance at or speak to Molly, and he knew she knew—knew how all the drowned emotion of a miserable year surged up in his heart, as he inwardly compared the sweet childlike face of the bride, to whose dear lips he had that morning publicly, with others,

in the vestry, for the last time, pressed his own, with the face of his wife. His wife! and yet apart for ever—shackled with bonds that death only, or social death—sin—could dissolve.

“You forged the shackles,” answers Selina’s mind, “and you must wear them. Carry them nobly if you can.”

The speechifying is scant to-day, for the General votes all speeches a bore, saving those that were spoken a short while since in the House touching the question of the Abolition of Purchase. Some one proposes the old, old toast—the bridesmaids; and in the old way the youngest bachelor gets up to return thanks on their behalf. He is a lieutenant in the 7th Dragoon Guards, all nose and moustache, with a twinkle above the former indicating an eye; and he dashes, with a real cavalry charge, right into the difficulty, fixing his gaze persistently on Miss Sally, who, abashed and discomfited by the stare, feels there is something amiss with her bonnet, or that she has smeared her mouth with strawberries, and vainly seeks consolation in her sister’s countenance, between whom and herself intervene several couples, and no end of flowers and gloves, and half-filled wine-glasses.



The big dragoon gets through the conventional platitudes with an alacrity that his best friends would scarcely have anticipated, roaring out his words in a great manly voice that would be capable of thundering forth any tremendous military order, eliciting a certain applause from many persons whom he shakes into mirth; and even from the General, who utters a loud "Hear!" with an accompanying guffaw, when he says that speech-making is as hard to him as "route-marching to a volunteer."

And, finally, Molly creates a little commotion at the top of the long, white table, by rising to effect her exit; and she goes out, attended by her sister and her adopted mother, to doff the orange crown. How it all came about she could never definitely tell; the old affection had been offered when her heart was lonely in the double loss of lover and father; the General had taken in his the wee hand, and pleaded for his nephew, and she had been touched and surprised into the little monosyllable which had grown into all this Gunter celebration, that signing away of her maiden name in the vestry of All Saints', and the parting word, capable of such diversified expression—of such infinite depths of love and

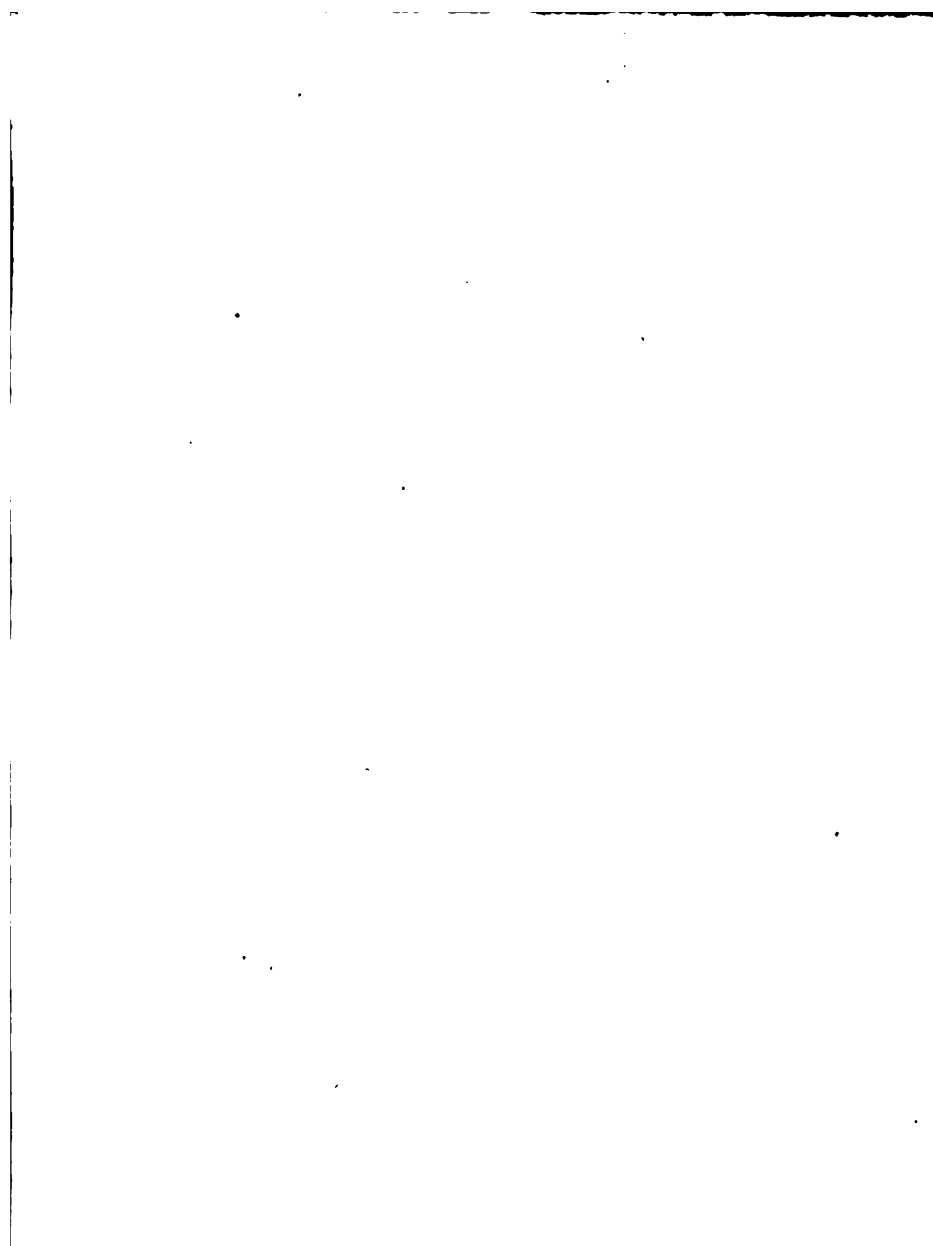
tenderness and gratitude—"Good-bye! good-bye!"

What a shaking of hands! what a show of pocket-handkerchiefs, from Miss Maria's homely linen to her Ladyship's fine Honiton! what profusion of good-wishes, hurriedly spoken! what smiling adieux waved gracefully from window and door! Miss Sally, squeezed into a corner between the stout Mrs Sterne and a lady in a large crinoline, forgets the genteel company in which she is, forgets everything but that it is Molly Bloomfield who was married this morning, and utters an unguarded exclamation—"Lor! how nice they both look, to be sure!" whilst she brushes tears of genuine joy and pride away from her brimming eyes, unconscious of the supercilious stare to which the lady in the crinoline is treating her.

A second burst of Mendelsohn, this time from the attendant band; last kisses blown from Molly's fingers to Miss Thorold, whose dark earnest face smiles tenderly down upon her from a room above; a last grasp exchanged between Thorold and the General, and the coachman cracks his whip, driving off to Paddington Station.

“Here, I’ll chuck the slippers after them!” says the big dragoon; and farther than went those two little satin shoes, we, my friends, are not permitted to follow.

THE END.



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